

When They Drink: Is Collegiate Drinking the Problem We Think it is?

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The third monograph in the “When They Drink” series
exploring the issue of campus drinking

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Introduction

The Issue

I once heard that accepting one's aging is correlated with the awareness that one is not so much approaching life as a follower, but embracing it as a leader. As professional counselors and educators, we started our careers pursuing the ideals of favored theorists, mentors, professors, or admired colleagues only to awake one morning realizing that we had become these very theorists, mentors, professors or admired colleagues for the next generation. My grandfather used to tell me that the challenge at this point in life is to accept the mantle conveyed by the new generation with humility and never lose sight of one's ability to wonder...a necessary prerequisite for continued growth. With this in mind, this monograph is dedicated to exploring some personal thoughts that I have found myself considering as I teach the next generation of theorists & practitioners about high-risk and troublesome¹ collegiate drinking.

When I started my career as a professional counselor in 1972, I was committed to the pursuit of solving problems experienced by my clients, "fixing what was broken" if you will. Consequently, I was enamored of behaviorism and the tools it provided to "extinguish" maladaptive behaviors, fostering instead new more "adaptive" skills and behaviors. This approach to counseling and its myriad techniques remain favored tools in my counselor's toolbox, readily available for regular use. But behaviorism no longer represents the panacea from which I once mounted my clinical and preventive interventions. Rather, these tools now serve as valuable adjuncts to the counseling I do, *arrows in the quiver* if you will, serving as available means to an end, that is, assisting students to affect change in their lives. They are used, however, only as specific tools for specific students to address specific problems; they are not a "one-size-fits-all" recipe for change.

Theoretically speaking, I next evolved into a practitioner, whose attention focused on potential solutions rather than a preoccupation with maladaptive behavior. I must admit that this continues to be an exciting prospect as the pursuit of mental health rather than the treatment of mental illness is more consistent with my philosophy of life in general and my metaphysical view of the world. Yet, as useful and rewarding as this "solution-focused" approach to counseling continues to be, I find myself in transition yet again. I seem to be moving further away from "treating" anything in counseling and headed rather in the direction of helping clients understand the meaning they attribute to the

¹ *Troublesome*, as a term used to refer to some collegiate drinking, is coined by Kathleen Carroll and William Miller in the first chapter of their book, *Rethinking substance abuse: What the science shows, and what we should do about it*, Guilford Press, 2006. In that chapter they qualify the use of this term, ...not because it is preferable but precisely because it was unfamiliar and shook us loose from comfortable custom (p.6).

myriad events, experiences, symbols, and icons that compose their lives. In my theoretical wanderlust I find myself attempting to create the opportunity—an epiphany if you will—to better appreciate that life and its seemingly unrelenting problems can actually present a perspective from which the decision to change becomes a personal choice rather than an outside mandate. As Viktor Frankl mused in *Man's Search for Meaning*, “Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how.’”

Perhaps it is time to consider a similar paradigm shift as we pursue the means by which to prevent high-risk and troublesome *individual behavior*, particularly when working with contemporary college students. There appear to be two separate and distinct issues involved in what we have collectively come to refer to as the *collegiate drinking problem*. First, there is the fact that large numbers of college students—80% according to the Harvard *College Alcohol Survey*—regularly use alcohol with two-thirds to three-quarters of these students being under the legal age to purchase and consume alcohol. Although this issue will be addressed in greater detail later in this monograph, it is important to introduce it here as a *cultural issue* in order to prepare the reader to question the traditional view of collegiate drinking as a problem perpetuated by collegians rather than a phenomenon unique to them.

Second, of those students that choose to drink, some significantly increase the likelihood of experiencing an “untoward”² consequence themselves if not creating one for bystanders in the environment where they drink. These phenomena will also be addressed in more detail in the monograph, but at this point it is important to differentiate the drinker from the culture in which he or she drinks. Just as there are two issues to be addressed, there need to be two different approaches to addressing these issues. Although the behavior of an individual who is the member of a cultural minority may require a specific intervention to address the *problem* it represents, if the minority culture from which the individual presenting the problem comes was viewed as *the problem*, this would constitute ethnocentrism if not racism, or *some other “ism,”* and that is no solution.

Student affairs professionals as well as collegiate administrators and legislative bodies on the state and federal level have done an excellent job of shifting from a historic “reaction” to the problem represented by the behavior of individual collegians that choose to drink as they move toward a more proactive response. With strategies like *environmental management*³ and interventions like Brief Alcohol Screening for College Students (BASICS),⁴ changes in individual drinking behavior have been noted and this is encouraging. It is not as clear, however, that efforts have been made to address the second and separate issue of how to change the *campus drinking culture*. It appears that our innovative approaches to addressing issue one mentioned above have been assumed

² *Untoward consequence* is a term coined for use in this monograph in order to move away from the connotation that all “consequence” is negative

³ To read more about *environmental management* visit <http://www.highereducationcenter.org/pubs/prev-updates/em101.pdf> Last visited 24 July 2007

⁴ To learn more about *BASICS* visit

<http://www.childtrends.org/Lifecourse/programs/BriefAlcoholScreeningBASICS.htm> Last visited 24 July 2007

to be all that is needed to address issue two as well. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the fact and herein lays an important focus for this monograph: Should collegiate drinking be broken into its component parts with an action plan designed to address each, independent of the other?

To Act or to React, That is the Question

Considering such a shift is nothing short of radical. It suggests moving from the current trend to view *all* collegiate drinking as *the* problem that needs to be eliminated, to suggesting that it is a dilemma requiring a proactive resolution. *Elimination* conjures up draconian attempts at eradication and this is simply never, as regards the propensity for college students to drink, going to happen. Resolution, however, implies a reduction in the untoward consequences of this collegiate drinking, and this is a more reasonable objective for prevention specialists and administrators alike. Such a paradigm shift will be provocative for many and tantamount to heresy for some, especially those steeped in the medical model with its need to identify etiological causes for diagnosable problems in order to prescribe definitive interventions to eliminate diseases, which is to say, problems. What if, however, student affairs professionals were to consider collegiate drinking as a phenomenon that results in untoward consequences for *some* collegiate drinkers rather than as a ubiquitous problem for all, that is to suggest, *a cultural problem*, in need of elimination?

High-risk or troublesome student behaviors occur and those individual students who choose to engage in them need to be encouraged to “deconstruct” their individual views/interpretations regarding drinking and reconsider the antecedents of a personal decision to drink. Although some individual students may experience personal problems or untoward consequences related to their personal choices about alcohol and its consumption, the question remains: Is collegiate drinking, in and of itself, the issue of primacy with which risk managers need to be concerned?

I do not suggest that disorders or bona fide medical conditions with etiologies steeped in physiological and/or neuro-chemical imbalances should be viewed as simple “dilemmas.” I do, however, suggest that many of the classic “disorders” traditionally addressed in counseling and psychotherapy may be more effectively treated if approached in this fashion. Even disorders like substance use and dependence, where evidence seems to be rather convincing that they may be exacerbated if not caused by neuro-anatomy and/or genetic anomalies, the treatment of individuals with these “medical” conditions may be effectuated by inviting the client to view recovery as the resolution of a dilemma exacerbated by their physical dependence.

A Case Study

Allow me to present something of a case study to illustrate my preceding point: I once saw a student who reluctantly agreed to meet with me at the insistence of a friend—a phenomenon all too infrequent in the delivery of counseling services in higher education, the “facilitated self-referral.” The student had a history of high-risk use of alcohol and over the counter (OTC) substances, e.g., benedryl, ibuprophen, etc. Both behaviors were severe enough to have resulted in significant untoward consequences for the student, for

example, transport to the ER for evaluation following excessive intoxication by alcohol, but no admission. Upon intake, the student was not determined to be suicidal, although there was clearly “something going on.” But was this *something* necessarily a problem and was it necessarily or exclusively a “medical condition” that needed to be treated? And if so, did that treatment necessitate the involvement of an external professional?

My client presented, both in word and affect, like a “battered puppy.” Eye contact was non-existent—and this was a white, middle-class woman for whom direct eye contact was a cultural hallmark of assertive attentiveness. Interestingly, this student was on the dean’s list, had no history of chronic interpersonal problems, had a supportive network of friends, and had maintained a monogamous relationship, although recently ended by mutual consent. To all practical purposes, this was a successful student that simply was not happy. Okay, “did you screen for depression?” you might ask; no, not technically. However, before you second-guess my clinical judgment, let me share with you that by asking a couple simple questions, in the context of a metaphorical story, in order to refocus the student on “the big picture,” direct eye contact returned along with an occasional smile followed by a more spontaneous exchange in our interaction.

I asked the student to image doing some “serious cleaning” at home—I asked if that would focus on the basement or the garage and the student stated with a smile, “basement!” I then asked her to look around the basement and notice all the old stuff lying about, the obsolete, moldy with age, or just plain “funky” stuff many of us have in the basement. I asked what should be done with this, to which she said the junk should be hauled to the curb for trash pick up. I agreed that this was a reasonable plan and asked, “What might your neighbor across the street say if seeing you doing this?” The student said, getting into the rhythm of the story, “Oh, cleaning out your basement I see, eh?” (I think my student might have been Canadian). I then asked, “What would your neighbor think if an hour later as the trash truck was coming up the street you were to suddenly dash out to the curb and retrieve all the trash and haul it back into the basement?” She deftly remained in step and said the neighbor would think this to be odd in the extreme if not consider her to be crazy. I then asked how often she had hauled her “psychic trash” back into storage.

We went on to talk about the student’s relationship with mom and her alcoholic stepfather, but my point is, we did so by viewing the student’s distress and “depression” less like problems to be solved in the traditional clinical sense of treatment and more like dilemmas to be resolved in the context of our counseling relationship—a basement full of “psychic trash” and a reluctance to discard it.

As we debriefed after the first session, I found myself talking with a different student. Gone was the indirect eye contact and down-turned mouth. Like the student that identifies two-minutes as “a short time” only to be asked to hold her breath for two-minutes can perceive the change in “how long two-minutes is,” so it would appear that this student was able to perceive options and choices simply by assuming a new perspective from which to view “the problem.” But was there a problem in a clinical sense of the term or a dilemma for which this student could find no resolution? In short,

by refusing to define a problem based solely on its observed “symptoms” and instead, considering the objective facts in the context of “the big picture,” it may be possible to differentiate between a problem that requires treatment by a professional and a dilemma the student is able to resolve. As William Miller suggests, sometime individuals simply get “stuck” in their lives and counseling is more about getting “unstuck” than about treating disorders. Put another way, most people tend to act in ways that are consistent with how we communicate we expect them to act.

The Lay of the Land

Before further considering the utility of a paradigm shift regarding the prevention of troublesome collegiate drinking, we first need to differentiate between the two perspectives being addressed: The “problem – solution” continuum and the “dilemma – resolution” continuum. The former presumes that “something is not right.” In this scenario, a specific treatment is applied or intervention initiated by an outside practitioner. As a result of the treatment or intervention, “something” is changed if not removed so that it no longer represents a threat or encumbrance for the community. This way of conceptualizing the phenomenon of collegiate drinking supposes that student drinking *is the problem* and that it can theoretically be eliminated.

The latter perspective acknowledges that there may be issues related to collegiate drinking, but collegians, as a population, are not *the problem*. The dilemma is, although many students drink, only some experience untoward consequences. Others drink and may periodically experience untoward consequences while still others drink and experience untoward consequences on a regular basis. There must be a variable beyond student drinking itself that accounts for this variance in the consequences experienced by those who choose to engage in the behavior. This then is a dilemma or conundrum to be resolved rather than a problem to be eliminated. Once we unlock the secret of the variance in consequences for collegiate drinkers we will be better prepared to apply this knowledge to the quest to reduce the prevalence of these untoward consequences.

As consistent as the problem approach to addressing the phenomenon may be with American if not all Western thinking—you can do anything that you put your mind to doing—I suspect that there are those consequences of living that we simply cannot eliminate. I suppose that such *problems* can at best be contained and their negative impact minimized; a sort of a *harm reduction* approach to public policy if you will. As with the eventuality that life culminates in death, we cannot eliminate underage and collegiate drinking. But as science, nutrition, and technology have doubled the life expectancy over the last 100-years for those born in the United States, we almost certainly can affect change in the way alcohol is consumed by contemporary college students. This, then, is roughly analogous to the dilemma – resolution continuum.

But to truly appreciate this conundrum, we must first address the issue of what constitutes *a problem*. Is there such a thing as a “universal” problem meaning that no matter where or when a situation is encountered it will consistently be viewed as, “a problem”? And when considering what constitutes “a problem,” are there criteria that determine what is or is not one, or is the designation simply a moniker ascribed to a particular behavior or

phenomenon that is deemed inappropriate or unacceptable by the individual or group identifying the problem? As Wayne Dyer, a popular lecturer and author on issues related to popular culture and spirituality once quipped, “The only difference between a flower and a weed is a judgment.”

These questions may seem ludicrous at first glace. They do, however, have meaning regarding the question of high-risk and troublesome collegiate drinking.

When is a Problem a Problem?

It has been suggested above that collegiate drinking is a phenomenon. As such, it is one that has captivated the interest of social scientists and student affairs professionals for better than a decade. The concerns regarding the consequences of this collegiate behavior are legion and the attention this concern has generated has spawned such provocative titles on the subject as Weschler’s *Dying to Drink*⁵. But what is referred to as the *problem* of collegiate drinking is perhaps a significant portion of the reason this collegiate behavior remains so intractable. What if the perceived problem is just that, a perception of the observer rather than a quantifiable reality? This is not to suggest that there are not negative consequences associated with collegiate drinking or that these consequences are varied, significant, and costly. But what if the difficulty in addressing, and that is to say, reducing, preventing, or eliminating, this *problem* is not so much a function of the collegiate drinking being targeted as it is due to attempts to categorize and explain it in order to eventually change it?

Collegiate drinking is a behavior that exists on a continuum much the same as any other behavior. This continuum ranges from a total abstinence at one pole to excesses in consumption and the resulting untoward consequences at the other. Yet, the particular point on that continuum where we differentiate between what is and what is not a problem is left to the observer of the behavior to define. As regards the issue of collegiate drinking, this point is a function of how one’s behavior is perceived, and for the student drinker and the observer of his/her behavior this can yield two very different points of demarcation. This is akin to the suggestion made above that the observer who perceives a problem is essentially a member of the *dominant culture* who views the behavior of *some* members of the minority *culture* and then deems *the problem* to be a function of the minority, en masse, rather than the behavior of some members of that minority. Students of social psychology will find this roughly analogous to what is referred to as *confirmation bias* as one tends to find evidence in support of a particular belief.

There is an old adage, first heard by the author in 1978 during a lecture delivered by Father Joseph Martin, a well known lecturer and advocate for the proactive treatment of alcoholism. When speaking of addiction in general and alcoholism specifically, Fr. Martin suggested that, “What causes a problem is a problem because it causes problems.” This struck me as profound then and thirty years later is no less prophetic. But the point remains, who determines what is—and equally as important—what is not a problem?

⁵ To access my review of this book visit http://www.unhooked.com/booktalk/dying_to_drink.htm Last accessed 26 July 2007.

Let's consider the old example from high school physics that attempts to explain, in part, the theory of relativity: Imagine a person standing in the aisle of an express train moving down the tracks. This individual is bouncing a ball...the ball leaves the bouncer's hand at point "A," drops to the floor and bounces straight back to the individual's hand, which to all in the passenger car is in the same place as when the ball was released, point "A." Outside the train, standing on a platform in a station as the express passes through, an observer views the passenger bouncing the ball. However, to the observer, the ball leaves the passenger's hand at point "A," drops to the floor and bounces back to the passenger at point "B" several feet in front of where the ball was first dropped. Although it is true that we can explain, mathematically, the outside observer's perceived distance between points "A" and "B," from the perspective of the passenger on the train there has been no such movement. Even though the passenger is aware of the forward momentum of the train, the experience of the observer and that of the observed are quite different.

Ironically, neither the observer nor the observed is aware of this dissonance as each is comfortable in his or her belief that what has been perceived is real. The variance between these two realities is of no consequence to either, that is until and unless a discussion between the two were to develop as to whose perception was correct. And assuming that both the observer and the observed are not theoretical mathematicians, if one was to present his or her perception of reality to the other, it would be rejected out of hand as absurd. Note that countries have gone to war over smaller differences in perspective as to what is truth, and Galileo was subject to house arrest by the Church of Rome because he refused to recant his assertion that the Earth revolved around the sun. Truth, apparently, is what those in power—the dominant culture—declare it to be.

Taking some liberties with the high school physics example, what if we consider the observed passenger on the train to be the collegiate drinker (*the student*) and the observer on the platform in the station *the adult*? It may be clear to the adult that the student's behavior is high-risk if not problematic and something that can be easily documented—and this will be discussed further in this monograph. From the perspective of the student, however, nothing has changed: Remember that what causes a problem is a problem *only when it causes what is perceived to be a problem*. If what causes a problem in the eyes of the adult is not perceived to be a problem by the student, why would the student be motivated to consider changing that behavior...especially if it proffered a successful solution to a perceived *real* personal problem, for example, social shyness or anxiety? To the adult, the student's drinking is a problem because the student is under 21 and/or misses class or engages in some troublesome or nefarious behavior. To the drinker, however, the drinking has accomplished what it was intended to accomplish...social engagement and interpersonal confidence with the resulting missed class an acceptable consequence of an otherwise successful ploy to address what, for the student, is a *real* problem.

Let's return to Fr. Martin's adage regarding a drinking problem, but modify it just a bit. Instead of looking at this admonishment as suggesting, "what causes a problem is a problem *because it causes a problem*," what if we look at it from a slightly different perspective, namely, what causes a problem is a problem *when it causes a problem*. As

much as this may appear to be the author's attempt to dabble in semantics there is more to this change than simple word play. The issue of language as a symbolic representation of the reporter's reality will be addressed further in a subsequent section of this monograph, but for now, note that there is a perceptible difference in the meaning of these two seemingly identical statements. In the first "...because it causes a problem" is a declarative statement. It is a declaration made by the observer based on his or her assessment of the other's behavior and an evaluation of it—what I observe is true because I know it to be so. And although this declaration may be consistent with a cultural truism, it is nonetheless a *subjective* interpretation of the behavior being observed from the perspective of the observer.

In our example of the student drinker being observed by the adult, the problem associated with the drinking is only a problem because the observer has deemed it to be so, from her/his perspective. This is what a sociologist & social psychologist like Peter Cohen of the University of Amsterdam might call a socially constructed problem.⁶ Put another way, if I drink and miss class, this can only be perceived as a problem if I perceive missing class as being a problem *and* that my drinking was the cause for that absence. Therefore, from the perspective of the student affairs professional or faculty member, this consequence of student drinking is a clear and definitive example of how collegiate drinking can be problematic. But for the student who does not see missing "a class" as being problematic—and may or may not agree that drinking was a mitigating factor in that absence—the observer's perception is ludicrous, particularly if the drinking accomplished what the student intended it to accomplish in the first place.

If, however, we rephrase Fr. Martin's adage just a bit, noting that what causes a problem is a problem *when it causes a problem*, we shift the focus of discerning problematic behavior from the observer to the observed. In the case of the collegiate drinker, when he/she perceives the cost/benefit ratio between drinking and its consequences to be too high, a problem is then recognized by the drinker. It is at this point that the drinker begins to entertain the possibility that change may be both realistic as an objective and appropriate as a personal goal. It is facilitating this shift in the student's perception of reality that has made approaches to intervening with high-risk and collegiate drinking such as BASICS (*Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students*) type programs so effective.⁷

The Collegiate Drinking Problem

High-risk drinking is a phenomenon that has been the focus of attention in higher education for almost two decades. Since the first Harvard School of Public Health "College Alcohol Survey" results were published in 1994, this phenomenon has been frequently observed and at least anecdotally documented by anyone that has attended a college, worked in higher education or owned property contiguous to a college campus.

⁶ See *Is the addiction doctor the Voodoo Priest of Western man*, <http://www.cedro-uva.org/lib/cohen.addiction.html> last viewed 6 July 2007

⁷ For an overview see *Brief interventions for heavy-drinking college students: 4-year follow-up and natural history* by Baer, Kivlahan, Blumne, McNight, and Marlatt. <http://www.ajph.org/cgi/reprint/91/8/1310.pdf> Last viewed 5 July 2007.

Students view collegiate drinking as a phenomenon so ubiquitous as to be considered a developmental “rite of passage.” “Older” adults remember their experiences with alcohol in college fondly and find it difficult to find fault with the consumption of alcohol by any aged collegian, all the time voicing increasing concern for student consumption of “other drugs.” It would seem that in the U.S. most adults have taken a “laissez faire” approach to collegiate drinking—they disapprove of its impact on student behavior but all but celebrate its role in ensuring a meaningful college experience. This is a love-hate relationship and many members of the “lay community” have gone to great lengths in recent years to rail against the “problem of binge drinking” while defending a collegian’s right to “drink responsibly.”

There have been fluctuations in the numbers of students engaging in troublesome drinking thanks in part to innovative programming like social norms campaigns and brief motivational interviews with high-risk drinkers as well as an increasing awareness of the role that environmental and ecological strategies can play in shaping a campus culture. Yet the rates of student drinking persist—approximately 80% of collegians nationally drink according to the recent Harvard CAS studies, and this can be as high as 90+% in some areas of the country—whereas about 66% of adults nationally report drinking. The rates of high-risk or troublesome drinking—terms much more suited to this phenomenon than “binge-drinking”—show no signs of yielding with about 44% of contemporary collegians reporting that they drank at least once in a high-risk fashion (5+ standard drinks⁸ in an outing) in the two-weeks prior to being surveyed in these same Harvard CAS samples.

Although this could lead one to hypothesize that contemporary collegians are, “Going to Hell in a booze soaked hand basket,” there may be more to this story than is apparent at first glance. The “rest of the story,” as the famed newscaster Paul Harvey used to say in his radio broadcasts, may hold something of significance for student affairs professionals, as they consider “better” addressing this stubborn, if not intractable problem of high-risk collegiate drinking.

So, Just How Prevalent is *the Problem*?

Let’s take another look at those Harvard CAS samples that suggest so many contemporary collegians drink and that a sizeable minority of them do so in a high-risk fashion. There is no doubt that these numbers are alarming, but it is incumbent upon the student affairs professional to look at these data a little closer and note “which” collegians are doing the drinking. Of the high-risk drinkers on a given campus, what proportion of them are first or second-year students? We know that the majority—some estimates run as high as 75%—of entering first-year students bring their high school drinking habits and preferences with them. With the newly acquired freedom that accompanies collegiate life, these high school preferences and practices flourish if not expand. The result is that first- and second-year students are among the highest-risk

⁸ To review a standard drink visit

http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Practitioner/PocketGuide/pocket_guide2.htm

drinkers in college⁹. As they realize the correlation, however, between drinking a belly full of beer on a Friday night and their grades at the end of the semester—not to mention the preponderance of “drunk calls” made on the omnipresent cell phone with speed dial to former significant others at 2 AM or apologies that have to be extended for vomit deposited on the desk in a friend’s dorm room—students begin to moderate their behavior in general and drinking specifically. This is so widely recognized as to have been named the “maturing out phenomenon” and we see it with virtually every student that enters college. Whether this results from experience alone or is a part of a natural maturational process is irrelevant to this essay’s intent. Suffice it to say that students change their attitudes, values and belief—and consequently their behaviors—as they progress through the semesters in their collegiate experience.¹⁰

If sizeable portions of the high-risk drinkers in a sample drawn from a collegiate population come from 1st- and 2nd-year students, this is important for student affairs professionals to recognize, and many do. Special programming that targets these students has been successful in hastening the maturing out phenomenon. But the point remains that each year these more mature students graduate and are replaced by entering 1st-year students who bring their high-school attitudes, values and beliefs with them to the newfound freedom of collegiate life, and there in lies the rub. Like St. Augustine trying to empty the sea with a shell, student affairs professionals as well as senior collegiate administrators are left each year with a cohort of new students whose movement through the maturing out process must once again begin in earnest, shepherded by student affairs professionals, other staff, and faculty. Each year a new wave of students unfamiliar with college and its demands arrives on campus already habituated to a high-risk pattern of socializing, and thus the process begins anew...just like Bill Murray’s experience in “Groundhog Day” or to quote Yogi Berra, “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

Although unaware of any research that tests my “Groundhog Day” hypothesis, its logic suggests that its consideration may shed some light on why the alcohol-related numbers on collegiate drinking surveys remain so static. And if this hypothesis is born out, it suggests that until and unless colleges and universities begin to partner more effectively with high schools in general and their “feeder schools” specifically, little is going to change.

The good news is that efforts to partner with high schools—and even earlier—have already begun. Wesley Perkins and David Craig at Hobart-William Smith College in N.Y. are conducting groundbreaking work in the area of addressing high school student misperceptions about the social norms in their peer group¹¹. In addition, other schools like La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA have established consortia to open the lines

⁹ See “Alcohol & First-Year Students” in *When They Drink: Deconstructing Collegiate Drinking* by Robert Chapman (2007). Visit

http://www.rowan.edu/cas/cas/documents/when_they_drink_deconstructing_coll_alcohol_use.doc Last visited 25 July 2007.

¹⁰ To review the author’s unpublished qualitative research results regarding these student perspectives, visit <http://www.robertchapman.net/pposter.htm>

¹¹ See <http://alcohol.hws.edu> and click on “secondary education initiatives.”

of communication with its feeder schools and begin the process of effective prevention programming *before* its future students ever arrive on campus.

We have come a long way in recent years regarding the quest to address high-risk collegiate drinking. The issue is appropriately on the “short list” of things to do for every college senior administrator across the country. Innovative programs steeped in awareness of how environmental management strategies (see <http://www.edc.org/hec/framework/>) and the use of the social ecology model (see <http://www.edc.org/hec/drughied/1997.html>) are changing the way colleges and universities address these problems “as we speak.”

As Dickens wrote in his opening paragraph to *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times,” we have new tools to use but much work to do. However, as another, more contemporary sage, Art Buchwald, mused, “Whether it’s the best of times or the worst of times, it’s the only time we’ve got.”

Framing the Problem

Newton’s *Third Law of Motion* states: “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Although alcohol use would not seem connected to physics and mathematics in ways other than the academic performance of the contemporary collegian who has imbibed prior to an exam, there may be a social application of Newtonian logic that speaks to what is arguably one of the major public health problems being faced by higher education thus far in the 21st Century.

No discourse on the subject of collegiate drinking can likely occur without a consideration of the “...equal and opposite reaction(s)” associated with it. In fact, one can probably not go a week without encountering some description, be it a news item or research report, of the drinking done by contemporary college students, usually in the form of outlining the negative consequences associated with imbibing.

Yet as frequent as these reports may be and as detailed in their account of the problems that can be exacerbated if not caused by drinking, these reports generally do not speak to the consequences of collegiate drinking for the *rest of the community*. True, when alcohol-related violence, be it sexual assault, fights, or alcohol-field riots are reported, the impact on the community is implied if not directly assessed in accounts of injury, costs, et cetera. However, only collegiate “insiders” are aware of the consequences of collegiate drinking and how they affect *all* members of the higher education community.

The general public is aware of the problems associated with the drinking done by college students. From community members concerned about noise, litter, and discourteous behavior to general consumers of the popular media who hear about “binge drinking,” the problems associated with student drinking are perceived as legion and a matter of public record. Unfortunately, however, this awareness is so complete, that the average American citizen often perceives that *all* contemporary collegians are indicative of the problem. We

know from research that has been consistently conducted over the past 15 years that this is not true.

Although there is debate in the prevention community about how to refer to the type of drinking that can result in this awareness of a problem—is it really *a binge* if someone has 5 or more drinks during an outing? Is it high-risk drinking? Is it troublesome drinking?—the fact remains that it is a relatively small proportion of the college population that regularly engages in this behavior. Having suggested this, the minority of college student drinkers that do engage in what social scientists and student affairs professionals have deemed problematic drinking do contribute to an inordinate number of untoward incidents that affect *everyone* associated with the institution in which the drinking occurs. This is what is referred to by some as the bystander or *secondhand effects* of this type of collegiate imbibing. It is these consequences to others that constitute one of the primary foci of this monograph.

Although reference will be made to the problems collegiate drinkers affect upon themselves when they drink, one issue of primacy in this monograph remains those under-reported, bystander or *secondhand* consequences.

What is a *Secondhand Effect*?

Most likely a term associated with cigarette smoking, e.g., *secondhand smoke*, these effects represent the consequences of a behavior that impact the lives of those who do not engage in a particular behavior but are nonetheless affected by the consequences of those that do. As regards the general consumption of alcohol and its intoxicating effects—or those of any other drug for that matter—the consequences of consumption extend not only to those contiguous to the user, but to those who may be, directly or indirectly, affected by the behavior as well. For example, the conditions of bathrooms in residence halls “the morning after,” fire alarms engaged in the middle of the night by an intoxicated prankster, and other *quality of life* issues associated with collegiate life.

Essentially, a secondhand effect is anything a drinking student says or does—or neglects to do—that may impact the experience of another. It is a common rationalization of the intemperate drinker to assume that if one engages in troublesome or inappropriate behavior after imbibing, the only one affected is the drinker. The truth is, however, it is very difficult for collegiate drinkers to *not* impact the general environment and/or quality of life for others with whom they share that collegiate environment or who live contiguous to it.

Deconstructing *Problem Drinking*

But to return the questions posed above: Are the consequences of collegiate drinking and its secondhand effects necessarily problems? Is a behavior that is deemed by some to be a problem, actually a problem universally? Does an operational definition of “a problem” exist and if so, is there a universal event or consequence that is understood to be an example of such a problem? Do the apparently disparate views of collegiate administrators and student drinkers represent an issue of cultural diversity rather than social psychological problem?

These are questions to be explored in this monograph. It is not expected that this tome will answer these or other questions to the extent that a new course of action becomes obvious for preventionists working in the area of higher education. It is expected, however, that considering these questions will add richness to our understanding of high-risk and troublesome collegiate drinking that will serve to further efforts pursued to reduce the consequences of this student behavior.

Consequently, there are three basic questions this monograph intends to explore: (1) Is high-risk and troublesome collegiate drinking a problem in need of a solution or a dilemma in need of resolution? (2) Are the effects of high-risk and troublesome collegiate drinking unique to the consumer or is the sphere of influence created by this behavior wider and more inclusive than is frequently considered, and (3) is it possible that questions 1 and 2 may even be superfluous to the extent that they seek universal consensus on an inherently idiosyncratic phenomenon...collegiate drinking?

It is the purpose of this monograph to explore these questions in order to further open the discussion on the prevention of high-risk and troublesome collegiate drinking.

Alcohol and Behavior

I've noticed a lot of violent, destructive, rude behavior. I know people, when they are drinking, something happened to set them off; they'll just get really violent and punch a wall or whatever and have scars all over their hands.

Again, back to people tearing things apart, kicking things, destroying things, really, a lot of times it will get out of hand. They don't know when to stop...that what they're doing is wrong. They'll just act without thinking about what they are doing. And a lot of times that will have negative, some form of punishment or retribution or whatever will have to be paid. They'll have to do something to make amends for what they have done.

An 18-year-old first-year student.

Introduction

An awareness of the association between consuming alcohol and socially unacceptable behavior is, quite literally, biblical—"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Proverbs 20:1). Alcohol is considered, in and of itself, responsible for the aberrant behavior frequently displayed by the intoxicated consumer. It is therefore tempting to assume a cause-and-effect relationship between drinking and untoward consequences such as vandalism and violence. Such reasoning led to this country's experiment with prohibition between 1920 and 1933 in the form of the 18th- amendment. Remnants of this public policy approach to addressing social concerns about alcohol continue to this day.

Support for prohibition, be it the 18th amendment in 1920 or restricting the sale of alcohol in certain counties today, stems from the belief that alcohol as a substance is the source of the problems related to its consumption. To curtail access to the substance if not eliminate its availability is to address the problems associated with its use, or so goes the argument. Although this social experiment failed in the early part of the 20th century, the view that alcohol and those who abuse it represent a problem to be controlled if not eliminated remains to this day. Such beliefs represent the somewhat simplistic views of many concerned about collegiate drinking—the problem is the students who drink rather than the issues affecting their decision and its resulting consequences.

Although decisions to maintain a *dry campus* or comply with mandatory minimum drinking age legislation are the closest remnants of prohibition to remain in effect on college campuses, collegiate approaches to addressing concerns about drunken comportment have changed in recent years. Interest in environmental management strategies, social norms marketing, and the use of

Motivational Interviewing and harm reduction techniques in individual interventions with collegiate drinkers has increased dramatically¹². Yet, although use of these innovative and evidence-based approaches to addressing high-risk and troublesome drinking have increased, overall efforts to affect the general campus drinking culture continue to focus on collegiate drinking as a problem rather than exploring the issues that drive student decisions to drink. This is not to suggest that the trend to act on collegiate drinking through environmental management and innovative approaches to intervening with student perceptions are misguided or inappropriate; quite the contrary. These approaches have enabled higher education to assume a more assertive role in addressing collegiate drinking behavior. The issue for consideration, however, is do these approaches increase our understanding of the correlation between drinking and its untoward consequences?

While the existing alcohol policies of many institutions of higher education would suggest that alcohol is the problem, the students interviewed by the author during his career in higher education tend to think otherwise. Most spoke of their belief that while a relationship does exist between the alcohol consumed and the behavior displayed, students perceive this as not so much the result of the alcohol consumed, but rather the result of the student's expectations of drinking and being intoxicated or a reduction of the drinker's inhibitions, which thereby increase the likelihood of engaging in more overtly explicit forms of social behavior. Put another way, subjects believe it is the drinker rather than the drink that explains the correlation alcohol and behavior.

Personal Expectations and Drinking Behavior

Students report that their expectations of drinking and the resulting intoxicated behavior they display and/or witnessed resulted from previous exposure to drinking and drinkers and/or the myths and folklore that surround collegiate drinking. Of particular interest is the extent to which student behavior is affected by the perceived consumption of alcoholic beverages even when what was being consumed were low alcohol or alcohol-free drinks. This rouse is graphically related by an 18-year-old first-year student as she speaks of the intoxicated role enacted by students:

When I see drunk people and I'm not drunk, I think it's funny. A great example of that is, one of the "happy hours" they (a fraternity) had. They had a keg and they also had a mix; it's supposed to be grain and grape juice or something like that. Anyway there's no grain in there. And I was talking to one of the brothers and I was just like, "This is fine." I'm like, "I've had so many glasses of this," and I'm like, "it's fine, there's nothing in here and I'm like fine, there's nothing in here." Just look around and see how many people are acting drunk that's drinkin' it! And

¹² See footnotes to environmental management and *brief alcohol screening and intervention for college students* in the preface to this monograph.

it's so funny. Mostly girls drink, ya know, the mixed stuff, and they were all like laughing and giggling and they were, like I told you, they, they like absorbed it or something (laughing) because there's like nothing in there! And they made themselves believe, and it was so funny. And they (the fraternity) do stuff like that every once in a while just to see what would happen if these people really seriously thought they were drunk and they weren't! If you're around a lot a drunk people and you're drinking but not as drunk as other people are, well, I think a lot of people are drunk, but a lot are just actors.

Such comments suggest that if a student believes that alcohol is being consumed, the expectation of alcohol's effect is sufficient, in and of itself, to affect behavior¹³. This anticipation can then result in a display of behaviors thought to be appropriate based on how much was consumed and how fast the student drank it. Once this chain of events is set in motion the student acts out the expected role of someone under the influence according to his or her personal understanding of what role must be. Although acting out the perceived role of being under the influence is more dramatically brought to light when the student actually experiences alcohol's affects on the central nervous system, for example, the *buzz* after consuming some alcohol, the simple act of consuming what is *thought* to be/contain alcohol can initiate an anticipated behavioral cascade.

What the student alludes to in the quote above is the symbolic power attributed to alcohol to release one's *inner being* or as one student told the author, what "allows me to be what I want to be." This alcohol-affected behavior can apparently be observed even when there is only the perception of alcohol having been consumed. Drinking's ability to affect behavior coupled with its symbolic ability to release the "true me," the collegiate translation of the Latin *in vino veritas*, suggests an intriguing concept worthy of further consideration regarding efforts to prevent high-risk and troublesome collegiate drinking.

Implications for Preventionists

The cited quote refers to the behavior of students after consuming non-alcoholic drinks as "funny." This introduces several interesting questions: What are student perceptions of alcohol's role in the behavior displayed by those who have been drinking? How do students explain these behaviors? And based on their perceptions, what is the meaning they attribute to alcohol as a result? These become intriguing questions in light of the impact they may have on our understanding of the maturing out phenomenon and the resulting insight it provides on hastening this naturally occurring process.

¹³ To explore this effect further, read Marlatt, G. A. and Rohsenow, D. R. (1980). "Cognitive processes in alcohol use: Expectancy and the balanced placebo design"; *Advances in Substance Abuse* (vol 1) or a review of the experiment addressed in the article at <http://www.parkcountycares.org/drinking/expect.html> last accessed 29 July 2007.

If there is a “drinking role,” then students, or anyone for that matter, who believes that alcohol has been consumed might act according to this role and display the overt behaviors consistent with the role when under the influence. If this is the case, displays of drinking behavior could then be explained as having been learned as easily as they could be called indications of physical intoxication—there is a *drunk role* that those drinking in a certain way display and this can be learned vicariously. This would seem to explain the oft heard declaration, “I can drink beer all night and just get silly, but when I drink hard stuff I tend to get into a fight.” If the ethanol in beer is the same as the ethanol in liquor, and it is, and equal numbers of standard drinks of each are consumed on different occasions, the resulting variance in the behavior of the consumer would seem to be due to the drinker’s expectation of how he or she will act under the influence rather than the type of alcohol consumed.

Rohsenow (1983), in a now classic article on drunken comportment, considered the role of expectancy in explaining alcohol related behaviors to be significant. He suggested that “(t)he mere belief that alcohol has been administered is sufficient to result in loss of control and craving in alcoholics, and changes in social anxiety, aggression, sexual arousal, and mirth in social drinkers, independent of actual consumption” (p.752). If behaviors can be influenced by personal beliefs, what does this mean for our understanding of students and their decision to drink?

As suggested above, the perception that different alcoholic beverages predetermine specific behavioral displays, as if there are different intoxicants in different alcoholic beverage, is intriguing. Students speak as different alcoholic drinks at least affects if not predetermines their behavior when drinking. This perception is voiced in this quote from a senior as he speculates about the variance in behavior for the same person who drinks on separate occasions:

I think that behavior depends on what kind of alcohol and what type of drink (you have). Some people may drink beer you see, and they’d be ok. Then they drink a different kind, spirits or something like that, and then they would act violent, act different.

He suggests that the student’s behavioral expectation when drinking is more complicated than the simple “how to act when drunk” role implied in the previously cited first-year woman’s comments. In the above quote, this senior male seems to insinuate that a student may not only have an expectation of what constitutes appropriate “intoxicated behavior,” but that a behavioral repertoire exists that reflect the specific alcoholic beverage consumed. Like the Shakespearian actor who one night portrays Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice* and another night Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, the role is determined by the play, or in the case of this student’s comments, the type of alcohol consumed. For this senior, it is the meaning attributed by the student to the act of drinking in concert with the behavioral expectations associated with consuming particular types of

alcohol that explains one's behavior when drinking. Consequently, we can infer that student's view alcohol as the catalyst that initiates change, but it is the drinker's expectations—and possibly the choice of beverage—that actually determines the behavior to be displayed.

To explain drunken comportment *via* individual expectations of alcohol impairment is one possible explanation for the varied behavioral responses displayed by student drinkers. Yet another aspect of drinking expectations and their impact on behavior was shared by students. This perspective on drinking and its impact on behavior did not focus on the actions of the drinker exclusively. Some students suggest that one's expectations based on another student's drinking may well influence their behavior at a drinking party. They speak of some male students who use a woman's intoxication in order to achieve sexual conquest, what is often referred to in the literature as the *sexual predator*. In essence, these individuals, who are generally male, await the onset of intoxication and resulting vulnerability it portends, expecting to take sexual advantage of the drinker's impaired state.

This junior speaks of this as he considers male student drinking and its impact on the way these students treat their female peers:

He'll be much more aggressive and I've seen people who are just totally passive become suddenly aggressive on women. I mean, God, just very up-front and forward, and almost to the point of being pushy about sex and things like that.

The expectation that sex is a part of the drinking experience, possibly influenced by the 1978 Columbia film *Animal House*, may lead to displays of aggressiveness as noted here. He continues, considering how this expectation is enhanced when the woman being approached has been drinking:

A guy's reaction to a girl that's drunk, I mean, some guys, a lotta guys, see that as an opportunity to have sex with the girl because they see that as kind of an opportunity because the girl...her inhibitions are down a little bit and you can take advantage of that. I've seen it go that way too. And if both of them are drunk, anything can happen, basically.

This presents an interesting question. In this brace of quotes, the junior suggests that some students prey on other students who have been drinking, especially males on females. But if, has been reported, they view alcohol as the vehicle by which the "real me" can be displayed, does this imply that students, at least males, understand the sexual permissiveness of a student who is intoxicated as being the uninhibited expression of the "true self"? This junior continues:

I mean, there's always this—I don't know if you'd call it a stereotype but there's always this thing that you hear on campus. "If you bring a girl to a party," especially a freshman girl, "and you get her drunk enough..." like they say, you know, "...then things can happen." I mean, (struggling with making his point) there's always that personification (sic), "If you get her drunk enough...(trails off)." It seems almost like, (finally getting it out) you're gonna trick this girl into sleeping with you.

Whether an intentional victimization of women or an intoxicated interpretation of an inebriated woman's perceived promiscuity, this is a chilling account of what many have come to refer to as acquaintance or "date rape" on American college campuses. Statements like, "...you're going to trick this girl into sleeping with you" suggests that he does not view alcohol, or a woman's intoxication, as facilitating genuine sexual desire. However, it does suggest that the male's efforts are calculated and intentional. It would be hard to explain such behavior as exclusively the domain of the alcohol as all males do not engage in this behavior, even when under the influence.

However, while these vignettes suggest that one's personal expectations of drinking and the resulting behaviors may account for a personal decision to consume alcohol, they do not necessarily explain the variety of intoxicated behaviors that a specific drinker may well display on different occasions. In fact, many students suggested that drunken comportment was rooted in the "disinhibiting" effect of alcohol. They argued that personal expectations were the source of behavioral results when drinking, but it is the removal of inhibitions that allow those behaviors to be displayed.

It is likely that explaining drunken comportment *via* an expectancy model alone is ill-advised. There is some question if it is the physiological effects of the alcohol consumed, some external mitigating effect such as environment, or both that elicits the drinker's expectations. It is such a point that led Steele and Southwick (1985) in a now classic study to question whether there are systemic effects of alcohol that influence human behavior and if so, how do they occur. This introduces a second student perspective on the behavior displayed by those under the influence of alcohol.

Alcohol and Inhibition

Students often suggest a more traditional explanation of the apparent association between the consumption of alcohol and excesses in behavior when drinking. They attribute drunken comportment to alcohol's ability to remove inhibitions from its consumer, that is to say, the ability alcohol has to "disinhibit" and thereby free the drinker to engage in a wider range of behaviors.

Due to the intoxicating effect of alcohol, as the consumer's blood alcohol level (BAL) increases, which results from ingesting alcohol faster than the body can

metabolize it, traditional social and cultural cues that influence individual behavior become less significant. MacAndrew & Edgerton (1969) refer to this as alcohol induced “time out” (p. 83). As the portions of the brain responsible for identifying and cataloging social mores are anesthetized by the increasing concentration of ethanol in the blood, the host is less conscious of the social determinants of appropriate behavior with a resulting increase in overt displays uncommon to the consumer when sober. In short, one may act differently when under the influence of ethanol because the sedative effect of the drug suppress those portions of the brain responsible for controlling social mores. In essence, disinhibition theory suggests that behavior changes observed during intoxication are at least physiologically influenced.

This point is reflected in the comments of a graduating senior woman when she says:

I guess your social inhibitions are just totally removed. You do a lot of things you wouldn't normally do, you know? And you do a lot of stupid things that you wouldn't normally do, I think.

This is echoed by a first-year student:

...if the guys were to come on Wednesday or something to the floors where the girls are just dressed in their normal clothes, they (the women) wouldn't know what to say because they have all their inhibitions. But when they go out and they're drinkin' a lot of beer, they go, “Ahh” and lose their inhibitions and can pick-up guys if they would like to. Like alcohol gives them the ability to tell them what they want to say whereas most the time you can't because of your inhibitions.

The closing sentence is a powerful statement. It is the alcohol that has the ability to do for the student what he/she cannot do for him-/herself. She has attributed to alcohol the power to unlock ‘truth,’ that is, “...the ability to tell them what they want to say...” She continues:

...when you lose your inhibitions it's kind of more fun and, you know, you run around and you can do anything without feeling like an idiot and other people aren't going to think you're an idiot because they're not really sure what's going on. And it's just kind of like a fun state, I guess, where they just want to have fun and be able to do whatever they want.

While these women speak as if alcohol had the ability in-and-of-itself to lessen inhibitions and thereby open the floodgate of human behavior, they do not seem to believe this to be an exclusively positive experience.

Here the senior implies the “disinhibiting” effect of alcohol is a doubled edged sword that can just as easily remove one’s ability to maintain control in a social situation as it can reduce the inhibitions that impede the student’s socializing when sober:

But, you know, I don’t think that being out of control is very good. That’s why I don’t really like to drink because, I mean I drink on occasion, but I can’t see like getting to the point where I can’t walk home or I can’t do anything. I’ve gone to parties with my roommate and been like, “OK, I’m leaving now. Are you going to come with me?” and she’ll be like, “Yeah, just wait fifteen minutes” and then I’ll leave and she’ll be passed-out somewhere or something.

Like I’ve never gotten to the point where I was so drunk that I can’t make it back to my room or be where I’m supposed to be. I don’t know, I just think being out of control is...(trails off). I don’t like that at all!

Often when drinking, students expressed intimate feelings or engaged in emotional displays that would otherwise have been shared with more discretion or in the company of closer, more trusted friends and confidants. The senior woman alludes to this as she continues:

I’ve witnessed people arguing with their boyfriends or their X-boyfriends for hours and hours on end. But I’ve never seen fights. I’ve seen like girls on my floor like coming home and crying because something happened at this party. Like, their boyfriend hooked-up with another girl or whatever and they’ll just be laying on the bed and crying and stuff like that.

It is this loss of control that may accompany a reduction in social inhibitions and emotionally incapacitate a student. Once this threshold is crossed and the emotional restraints are loosened, the student may share information, discuss issues, or display behavior that results in personal embarrassment and regrets if not damage to an existing relationship.

Students speak of situations where male and female friends drink together: As the effects of the alcohol lower inhibitions and impair personal judgment, liberties are taken. Such violations of the trusting relationship between friends often result in the friendship being damaged if not terminated. A first-year student makes this point while addressing the risks he saw associated with reduced inhibitions when drinking...a loss of personal control:

I know that it does happen and I know different people who have come onto people who are friends and now their relationship with

their friends is not so great because of it. And if they were drunk at the time, I don't think they really knew what they were doing when they did it.

And even if it is not a close friend with whom the student is interacting when drinking, their 'uninhibited' behavior often places them in an awkward if not embarrassing situation as this first-year student alludes to here:

I've noticed that some people can be very nice people when they're sober, but when they're drunk, they can be complete jerks. And they don't even realize they're being complete jerks, they just lose all control of their personality. They just are completely opposite of their normal self. Like guys who come onto girls and they have no clue who they are and make passes at them and different things like that. Just different relationship situations that can get kind o' problematic.

To this point, the students cited have talked as if the meaning they give to alcohol is that of a liberating agent or the key that unlocks the door to true self and allows the student to be "all he/she wants to be." However, those immediately cited above would have us consider alcohol as something other than a panacea, questioning if drinking may not only disinhibit, but impair as well, robbing students of personal control over their behaviors. This is ironic when considering the "freedom and independence" attributed to alcohol and drinking by first-year students in the previous monograph¹⁴. Again, the male first-year student:

I think when they're (students) sober they have a greater realization of what they're actions will be. They'll keep themselves in check. They'll, try to maintain some sense of tact, of discipline, say, "No, I'm not going to do this, this is wrong." But when they're drunk, they don't have their full capacity to reason, to say, "this is wrong!" They don't have their full judgment in tact so they'll be more likely to...slip-up and make a mistake or do something damaging. I think it could be argued that part of what happens is part of something that they're feeling inside without alcohol, but they just keep it in check. But then when they drink the alcohol, they just figure, "Well, I'll just let it all go," and then they act on their impulses that they normally wouldn't do.

Students seem to believe that the behavior displayed when drinking results from alcohol's ability to alter perception and reduce inhibitions. While recognizing that this may lead to a loss of personal control over one's behavior, they believe that, at least for them, this will not happen.

¹⁴ The chapter on First-year student drinking from the previous monograph is included as an appendix (A) to this monograph.

But should an untoward consequence occur when drinking, students reported that many of their peers act as though they perceive the alcohol consumed as responsible for their loss of control. Believing this, these students argue that their aberrant behavior, performed when intoxicated, should be excused and personal responsibility for the consequences removed as the student “was just drunk.” In essence, alcohol becomes the mitigating circumstance that should expunge culpability.

A female first-year student who lived in the resident halls, suggests, this is a common meaning students extend to alcohol:

I just keep to myself and think it's funny you know, when I see someone making a fool out of themselves through drinking. I mean, like a lot of people use alcohol as excuses and I don't go for that! I mean, like even for me, you know, I let my guard down and I talk to people and tell them things I wouldn't tell them when I was, when I was sober and like, you know, like you do things you normally wouldn't; talk to people you normally wouldn't talk to. But I just don't think that's an excuse...I would never say to someone, “You can't hold me responsible for that because I was drunk.” I mean, that happens so many times, like someone says something to you, you know, “I was drunk, you know you can't be mad, I was drunk.”

What is unclear in this comments and those of other interviewees is whether students intentionally use alcohol as an excuse to engage in behavior they know to be socially unacceptable or if intoxication becomes a convenient excuse used to extricate themselves from an embarrassing or otherwise unpleasant, but none-the-less unplanned, situation after the fact.

The graduating senior woman continues with a specific example:

I mean, so many, so many people use that as an excuse I think. Like fights...like one of my friends got into a fight at a party, “Well I was drunk!” “Yeah, so you can't control yourself when you're drunk?”

I mean, stuff like that...like when my friend got into a fight, you know, I understood. I understand that, you know, if he was sober it wouldn't have happened. So I can understand it, but I'm not going to excuse it. I'm not going to say, “Oh, then that's fine,” you know, “you were drunk, it's OK that you got into a fight.” I'm more like, “I understand that your guard was down. I understand,” but I just want you to think, “Well you have to be a stronger person when you're drinking.”

Another first-year student, a male, echoes these sentiments:

I've noticed that some girls act more drunk than they are, more ditzy and I don't know why they do, but they just act that way. Then if something does happen later on, a lot of times they'll use it as an excuse saying, "Oh, I was drunk, I don't care".

Returning to the graduating senior's female perspective:

People feel more uninhibited (sic) and more, I guess, more relaxed (when drinking), more at ease, and more confident with themselves. Maybe they think the next morning they're not responsible for what they did because there was alcohol involved.

When this woman suggests that any "morning after" regrets can be rationalized by blaming alcohol, she implies that drinking is a convenient vehicle by which students can resolve the cognitive dissonance between their personal values and the prior evening's behavior.

Thus, alcohol's appeal on campus is enhanced by its perceived ability to release student inhibitions while simultaneously excusing personal responsibility for one's actions when disinhibit. This is an important glimpse inside the contemporary collegians mind as regard drinking. A substance that can at the same time liberate one to be what he/she wants to be *and* excuse the indiscretions that such disinhibition initiates is likely to be a prized possession, and one likely employed with regularity.

A naive consideration of this brace of student perspectives is likely to find one viewing alcohol much like a diplomatic passport, providing free access to a new environment while providing total immunity for the consequences of one's behavior while visiting there. Each time a student would use this excuse or defense and be allowed to do so by peers or others is tantamount to having been negatively reinforced for having engaged in the behavior displayed while intoxicated. This is but another possible explanation for why the efforts of those concerned about the *problem* of collegiate drinking are perceived as reactionary and unwarranted by those engaging in the practice.

Conclusion

The body of literature that considers the relationship between alcohol and behavior is both extensive and rich in its explanation of this correlation. Likewise, this perceived relationship does not appear to have escaped the wary eye of the typical college student, at least for those interviewed by the author.

Two specific explanations for the apparent positive correlation between alcohol consumption and behavior were offered by students with whom the author spoke. First, it was reported that personal expectations of specific experiences likely to

accompany consumption, that is, a party atmosphere with its social intercourse and opportunity to “hangout” with friends, are common among students. This anticipation of alcohol’s ability to socially lubricate student interaction with peers also included the additional expectation that once under the influence of the alcohol, there would be a specific “role” to be enacted. In short, students reported that they expected certain events to occur when they drank and these would be facilitated by a “drunk role” to be enacted once having achieved a state of intoxication.

The second explanation offered for “drinking behavior” was related to alcohol’s pharmacological ability to depress the central nervous system thereby lowering inhibitions for the drinker. As the blood alcohol level of the consumer increases, the level of inhibition decreases in a negative correlation. As a result, behaviors otherwise held in check by a student’s awareness of and commitment to culturally based social mores are more freely displayed.

In addition to these dual explanations of the behavioral effects of intoxication, students offer additional insight to the meaning they place on alcohol and drinking. Because alcohol is viewed as capable of removing the inhibitions which hold students back from expressing their true feelings when sober, intoxication is accepted as an excuse for the aberrant behavior that so frequently accompany excessive drinking. This is significant in that, for those who believe intoxication alters the degree of personal responsibility associated with a specific behavior performed when intoxicated, there is an increased likelihood that such behaviors will be repeated. To the extent that this view is held by a group, not only is the questionable behavior rationalized by the perpetrator, it becomes condoned by the group, and, consequently, reinforced as appropriate. In short, the power collegians ascribe to alcohol as an icon of social prowess is underscored.

If intoxication by alcohol symbolizes a rational excuse for unconventional behavior and this belief is rife within a group, then the negative social consequences of the behavior in question, *untoward consequences* if you will, are likely to be minimized if not eliminated. This being said, the incentive to repeat the behavior is increased. Alcohol intoxication is symbolically interpreted as a release from traditional social mores and responsibility for violation, with the aberrant behavior, at least within the group in question, continued indefinitely. This is consistent with what MacAndrews & Edgerton’s (1969) describe as alcohol-related “time out.” In essence, while specific intoxicated behaviors may differ from culture to culture, the fact that intoxication is used to rationalize the deviance is consistent across cultures.

It can be argued that these comments and their inferred meaning are little more than generalizations based as much on the observations of the contemporary students interviewed by the author regarding their of peer behaviors as on their own experience. However, such observations and the impact they have on the meaning that these students place on alcohol and intoxicated behavior are consistent with a constructivist view of reality. Blumer (1969), in his

consideration symbolic interactionism¹⁵, explained this as, “Social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them” (p. 50). Student perspectives regarding alcohol and drinking, as represented in the quotes in this chapter, reflect the understanding of contemporary collegians as gleaned from their interactions with other students. This is consistent with a symbolic interactionist view that individuals are able to respond to the situations they encounter in terms of their perceptions of those situations.

What we are unable to clearly ascertain from the comments of these students, even those reflecting their interaction with peers, is whether this view of alcohol-related behavior only comes into play for a student after the fact or if it is considered a priori and used to empower students to engage in behaviors deemed socially unacceptable for one who is sober.

¹⁵ For a detailed overview of this sociological theory, visit <http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/f100.htm> Last visited 31 July 2007.

Alcohol and Academics

They (students) would probably say drinking was a lot more fun than sitting down, you know, and reading Shakespeare or something like that. And they figure, "Oh, I'll do it later, after I have some beers and get back to my room, I'll do my homework." But it ends up being, having a beer and having a beer and having a beer and they just go back home, falling asleep and not getting it done; just because it's more fun. People are just out to have a good time I think, college students, that is. Eighteen-year-old first-year student

Introduction

An overly simplistic but nonetheless appropriate consideration of the essence of higher education is that it is the opportunity to learn beyond high school, that is to say, the pursuit of knowledge, preparation for a career following graduation, and the refinement of existing if not development of absent social skills. Simply put, students have told the author that there are two primary reasons for going to college: (1) Furthering one's education and personal development, and (2) having a good time. Such endeavors fall within the purview of what might be called the 'collegiate experience' and shared by contemporary collegians as well as their parents.

It would appear from working with collegians that the quest for these twin objectives presents little difficulty beyond the initial challenge of adapting to the collegiate environment and falling into step with the academic and social rigors of post-secondary education. Although a recognizable source of stress, the transition to college is accomplished as the incoming student is able to adapt high school skills, both academic and social, to the expectations and demands of higher education. However, having already observed how alcohol and drinking may impact the more behavioral objective of social accomplishment as a component of collegiate success, how do these icons of contemporary college life affect the academic objectives in this formula for success?

Academic Consequences

Student drinking practices are negatively correlated with academic performance. This is a frequently reported consequence in the professional literature and one echoed online at sites maintained by the National Institutes of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and of Health¹⁶. There is a rather pronounced negative correlation between student drinking and academic performance: As drinking frequency and quantity increase, academic performance decreases. Such finding have been

¹⁶ Visit NIAAA's *College Drinking Prevention* website <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/StatsSummaries/snapshot.aspx> or NIH's *Preventing College-Age Alcohol Abuse* <http://www.nih.gov/news/WordonHealth/aug2004/story02.htm>

consistent for almost 30-years with historic studies by Hill & Bugen (1979) noting this negative correlation. Harford et al. (1984) reported that students who are academically successful tend to drink less than do their peers with poor academic standing and Hughes & Dodder (1983) and Brown (1989) reported that first-year students on probation at Kansas State University drank significantly more than their peers who were in good academic standing. These are data consistent with what the author has observed over a 20-year career in higher education as well as the anecdotal comments made by professional colleagues in informal or online discussion.

In addition to these data regarding actual student performance, Anderson & Gadaletto (????) have surveyed college administrators who report their belief that alcohol is a significant contributor in 34% of the academic difficulties experienced by all students and is a deciding factor in the attrition of 25% of all undergraduates who fail to complete their degrees. With an estimated 12 million students matriculated in higher education at the start of the fall 2007 term, if even 10% of the students represented by these figures were to leave higher education, these figures are staggering in lost revenue alone

In a 1991 simulation, Eigen (1991), in his consideration of these data, suggests that this reduction represented the loss of 120,000 first-year students in 1991 alone due to alcohol related problems. He emphasizes these data by asking us to consider them in terms of recognizable quantities and then projects them into the future with this series of prophetic statements:

More freshmen will become alcohol-related dropouts than there are freshmen in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Nevada colleges combined. Three times as many as in Tennessee colleges. Those alcohol-related dropouts will not earn what their graduating counterparts will, and the loss in lifetime earnings will be about \$33 billion for this year's (1991) freshman class. That's more than the annual contribution to our gross national product of all the hotel's and motels in America. There will be defaulted student loans, and un-reached potentials and aspirations. And this year's freshman class will pay \$3.1 billion less over their lifetime in taxes alone than they would have if there were no alcohol-related dropouts. That \$3.1 billion in annual lost tax revenue is more than the Federal outlay for all the guaranteed student loans in the nation. And the same will happen next year, and the year after that, until there is a profound change on our campuses (p.21).

To characterize these alcohol related dropouts as representing identifiable populations may enable us to visualize the scope of alcohol's impact on first-year students and grasp its significance for higher education. However, neither raw data alone nor their symbolic interpretation offers any meaningful insight as to

individual student perspectives on the effects alcohol and its consumption may have on the academic performance of individual collegians. Whether it is the consumption of alcohol that results in reduced academic performance or the fact that students who perform poorly tend to drink more frequently, we cannot begin to understand this clear correlation between alcohol consumption and academic performance from a student's perspective unless we are willing to consider it from her or his viewpoint.

Drinking and Academic Performance

Of particular significance when considering student views on the extent to which alcohol and drinking affect the pursuit of academic success is the opportunity to better understand how the confluence of "partying" and "studying" impact the dual objectives of socializing and learning. To the extent that study skills and habits affect one's academic performance and consequently grades, the lure of an active collegiate social life may be in direct competition with the requirements of academic success. First-year students often arrive on campus with preconceived notions about what college life is like and the role "partying" will play in that experience¹⁷.

For the student who arrives with high school study skills that may not transfer well to a collegiate environment—or because of burgeoning social habits that allow innate academic ability to atrophy—a preoccupation with social pursuits can have significant and deleterious impact on academic preparation:

It (partying) would influence your studies if you were going out every night and drinking and then that one night you do have to study, you don't have the study habits any more to be self disciplined enough to go to the library and study. Second-year student (male)

For the first-year student who is experiencing the independence of campus living and is away from the supervision and academic discipline often provided by parents when living at home while in high school, the opportunity to "party" can be quite alluring. Coupled with a naive belief that the academic challenge of college will be little different than that of high school, it is easy for a student to believe that there will be plenty of time to address academic responsibilities "later." The second-year student cited above continues:

When I finally had to sit down and study, I couldn't do it. I'd be in the library saying, "What am I doing here. I'm never here. How am I going to study this? I'm never going to know it?" I mean, last year I had trouble studying, a lot of trouble studying...I think because of the alcohol and going out...It falls back to the same thing, "I'm away, I'm on my own and can do what I want. If I want to drink, I can drink!" You know, if kids get in that rhythm,

¹⁷ For more on these first-year student perspectives, see Appendix A.

they can drink whenever they want, I mean, go ahead and get drunk this night and try and study the next night. It doesn't work for a lot of kids.

For this and many contemporary students, drinking appears to be an example of the *doing what you want to do when you want to do it* approach to collegiate life. This egocentric view of collegiate life is reminiscent of the entering student's belief that drinking is tantamount to asserting one's independence and expressing personal freedom as addressed in the chapter about first year-students from the second monograph and included as Appendix A in this tome. The student cited above is speaking of the academic down-side of this assertion of independence through drinking and partying, the academic equivalent of "terminal hedonism."

As students derive meaning for "drinking" and "studying"—or any other aspect of collegiate life for that matter—from their interaction with peers, this meaning will influence their individual choices. Where a student's high school choices were shaped by interaction with high school peers and parents, the college student determines appropriate behavior based on the interpretation of available facts resulting from interaction with his or her collegiate peers. Consequently, students will likely fall into step with peers and establish a pattern, or what this student refers to as a "rhythm," with regards to a personalized approach to college. Again, more from this student:

Like I said, they get into the rhythm, I mean like maybe this week you don't have any work to do so, you know, all your papers aren't for like two weeks so you just lay-back, watch TV, go over to the house (fraternity house), shoot pool or something, or go over to your friend's room, maybe go over to (names a bar) and catch happy hour or something like that.

Students during their first months in college are still socialized to approach their personal lives as they did in high school. In high school, decisions about what to do were often driven by a structured agenda, influenced if not controlled by parental regulations, high school schedules, and employment or athletic obligations. The student has been taught to assume that his or her time will be apportioned according to someone else's expectations of what the student should be doing at a particular time. In short, the student has not learned to manage his or her own time.

Add this reality to the already existing expectations of what college students do in college, for example, "party," and we begin to understand the significance of this student's comments. The fact that alcohol is readily available and easy to acquire, regardless of age, enables us to see a pattern developing that can represent academic difficulty for a beginning collegian. Continuing with the comments above:

Alcohol is so easy to get, *so easy*, you know what I'm saying? It's so easy to get that if you have nothing to do, you have no (school) work to do I mean, what do you do? You sit around, watch TV or you go and have a couple beers with your friends? See, you get into that rhythm where for two weeks I haven't done anything except hang-out with my friends, drank a couple beers or something like that. And then when it's time to do the work, you haven't done it for two weeks and you're saying, "What am I doing? Why didn't I do this two weeks ago?" You know, "I've got a paper due tomorrow, I got a five page paper due tomorrow and here it's 11:30 and I didn't even start it! What did I do these last two weeks? Why didn't I start it then?"

This "rhythm" is analogous to a current that flows swiftly below the surface of a deep river. While appearing calm on the surface, the "river" of collegiate experience is surprisingly deceptive. The unsuspecting and naïve novice student can quickly find him- or herself pulled under when venturing out into the cross-currents of academic responsibility and social opportunity.

It would appear that the "rhythm," likely to be perceived differently by different students, in some ways relates to a student's successful assimilation into the campus culture. To the extent that a cadence is established and the student falls into step, there is an increased degree of comfort with the new environment. This is the good news. The *less than good news* is, however, that the time between arriving on campus and adapting to the "rhythm" of collegiate life may be sufficient to impact student grades, thus resulting in one of the more often cited untoward consequences of collegiate drinking...poor academic performance. Returning to the analogy of the deceptively calm, swift-moving river of collegiate life, unable to stay afloat without assistance, these students are at risk of drowning as they recognize their situation and struggle to return to the point on shore from which they entered the water, that is, approaching their academic responsibilities as they did in high school. All to often, however, even if this objective was obtainable, it would be insufficient to meet the demands of many collegiate faculty.

When asked if alcohol had any bearing on a student's ability to do well academically, this female student quipped:

Well, you never see it have good effect! Like, "Oh, I got so drunk Thursday night and got up at 8:30 and got an 'A' on my test." Most of the time, people are losing a lot of their homework. Well not losing their homework, but losing a lot of their academic time because of drinking. Time that could have been spent on studying if somebody hadn't of brought up the idea of getting some beer or getting a bottle of something.

Comments such as this are disquieting in their similarity to those of returning students with whom the author has spoken. This woman equated drinking with a loss of time. This is time that could have been invested in academic efforts. Whether this occurred because of poor time management skills or because of the student's pursuit of personal freedom and the assertion of one's independence (see Appendix A), drinking with one's friends still resulted in academic difficulties in the eyes of these students.

When broaching this subject with other students with whom the author spoke, their perspectives are effectively summed-up in this statement by a twenty-two year old senior:

I know a handful of kids who have failed out because of alcohol. You know, they go out and get drunk and they blow-off a test and this happens a couple times over a couple courses. Yeah, I've seen a couple kids where this happened and they failed-out or had to drop-out. It's not like they don't study, but they go out on a Wednesday night and the next day they're hung-over and they cut all their classes. Even though they don't have tests or papers due, they cut all their classes and their teachers notice that.

This represents a variation on the theme presented in the student comments cited above. Where they spoke of "partying" instead of studying, this gentleman talks about the more immediate consequence of drinking: Missing classes the next day. This is another of the more frequently cited untoward consequences of drinking reported by those concerned about this issue.

Missing classes was the single most frequently cited academic consequence of drinking by students interviewed by the author. While some attributed this as much to the late hours kept by the student who goes out as to the amount of alcohol consumed, not being physically present in class the morning after represented a serious compromise to one's ability to succeed academically. And even if the student did make it to class the day after having been *out*, her/his performance in class was likely to be sub-standard and in danger of attracting the professor's attention. The just-cited senior continues:

And you know, the kids do that once or twice a week, cut all their classes. And I'm sure a teacher can kind of tell when someone comes into a class hung-over just by how they look, you know? They don't want to participate; they're just kind of sitting there falling asleep. Things like that. The teacher can kind of recognize what's going on and the kid just deteriorates like that.

For this senior, it is the convergence of alcohol consumption and the time dedicated to this consumption that suggests the deleterious impact drinking can have on academic performance. This may well be one of the moments when a

student begins to question the meaning attributed to alcohol and drinking that leads to the phenomenon of “maturing out” mentioned earlier in this monograph. Realizing such experiences and watching peers deal with similar incidents offers students a different vantage point from which to re-interpret the meaning given to alcohol and the importance assigned to drinking during their early months in college. In essence, the student is presented with the opportunity to step back from their earlier and somewhat naive approach to collegiate life and assess exactly what is happening. The appropriateness of the original meaning placed on alcohol and drinking, in light of a clearer understanding of the academic responsibilities of collegiate life, becomes suspect.

If a student is unable to re-evaluate this pattern of behavior, he or she has little opportunity to modify an approach to collegiate living and this may have significant academic consequences. This reconsideration of alcohol’s and drinking’s meaning in light of the personal impact both have on a student’s and/or a peer’s academics, is consistent with the view of a socially constructed reality suggested earlier. This view put forward that meaning is constructed, reconstructed, and confirmed through social interactions. Hence, the student’s future collegiate behavior is neither solely predetermined by pre-arrival expectations nor by blind commitment to a current course of behavior. The student is constantly reevaluating his or her experiences and using the resulting insight to question the utility of meaning ascribed to the various constructs of collegiate life. Put another way, students will continue to follow a predetermined course of action until they reach a point where to continue presents a greater hassle than making changes. It is at this point that maturing out takes place and it is figuring out how to best hasten this process that represents a significant opportunity affect the collegiate drinking culture.

Additional cues for reconsidering the meaning conferred on alcohol and drinking are found in their relation to the three most frequently cited saboteurs of academic performance: poor class attendance, failure to complete required assignments, that is, “homework,” and inadequate preparation for class participation and examinations:

Not doing your best, with alcohol I mean, comes from missing a lot of classes, going out late-night, staying out till 3-4 o’clock in the morning and not being able to get up for your classes. I mean, I haven’t done that this year, but last year, I mean, I missed class left-and-right. I just couldn’t get up and I’d just sleep right through my alarm and everything. 19-year-old, second-year student.

It is because first- and second-year students hold drinking in such high regard and view it as an assertion of their independence and freedom that it takes priority as a personal activity. Consequently, drinking, as an example of a student’s egocentric belief that doing what you want, when you want is a right, may hold primacy as a contributor to classroom absenteeism.

When considering the relationship between drinking and classroom preparedness or assignment completion, it becomes obvious to students as they observe their peers and recall situations where alcohol was actually a part of the process of preparing for class. This student continues:

I mean, I've seen kids doing their homework or papers where they're drunk or just sitting there drinking a beer. I mean, last year I thought it was cool to always have beer in my room. It was like cool to always sneak it in the dorms.

This is a powerful statement, drinking was “cool” during his initial years in college. This statement, in and of itself, permits a great deal of understanding with regards to student perspectives on alcohol and its use. His spontaneous and matter-of-fact approach to sharing this and other observations on collegiate drinking would appear to suggest the extent to which he sees drinking permeating every facet of the undergraduate’s life on campus not to mention his awareness of its academic consequence.

These beliefs regarding attendance, and preparedness are echoed, almost exactly, by a twenty-year-old junior. He outlines his understanding of the correlation between drinking and academic performance, especially for the first- and second-year students:

I'd say alcohol would probably affect the underclassmen more than it would the upperclassmen being that the upperclassmen know how hard the academics are. It affects, definitely, like class attendance. Class is definitely, greatly, affected by alcohol. I mean, someone figures they don't have a test or something due the next day and they figure they can go out no matter how early a class they have. They'll want to go out and have a good time if they don't have something to do like a test or a paper.

This is exactly the point, “...they figure they can go out no matter how early a class they have.” It is not so much that the student intends to cut classes the next day, but they have not yet learned that they cannot stay out late drinking and expect to be able to attend those classes the next morning. Students during their early semesters hold a view of collegiate life that includes both the expectation of late night “partying” and meeting their commitment to attend early morning classes.

The gentleman just cited continues by outlining the process by which he prepared to accomplish the twin expectations of academic success and an active social life while attending college during his earlier semesters:

I mean, you figure you get your busy work done for a couple hours and then you go out later on. I did that when I was an under classmen and right after I got done just reading through it, I'd go out. And you know, however early the class the next day, I'd still go out and have a good time and then see how I felt in the morning. It just didn't really matter to me, you know, how much I went out and drank. I'd just go out and wait and see. When I woke up, that's how I could make it to class or not.

It's almost as if the academic requirements of the collegiate experience are the rent that must be paid in order to remain in school in order to have a good time. And just as a tenant seeks to negotiate the least expensive lease and reluctantly accepts any increase in the monthly rent, so it would appear that this student was inclined to approach his academic debt in similar fashion during his early years.

For example, the impact "partying" can have on academic preparations is reflected in these comments by a twenty-year-old woman:

One time me and my roommate decided we were going to the (Greek) Halloween party after we were done studying. So we studied till 11, 11:30 and said, "Oh, we'll go and have like two beers and then we'll come home in like two hours. We'll sit around and talk."

Well, that did not happen. We both got trashed! We got home, we both fell asleep. My room mate was supposed to finish studying a chapter of Biology when she got home. Well, she never did. We both woke up late and I failed my test and she failed hers. We definitely shouldn't have drank as much as we did.

For Mary, there was no intention to disregard her academic responsibilities; she did not choose drinking over studying. For her, drinking was a reward for the work she had done and even then it was to "...go and have two beers..." and return in a couple hours. It was the amount consumed and the physical impact of those drinks on her ability to make it to class the next day that resulted in her absence. She went on to say that the consequence of her decision to go out and drink the night before a test resulted in her modifying her view on this staple of collegiate activity to the extent that she learned, "...not to ever, ever do that again."

This is again suggestive of Blumer's (1969) third premise of symbolic interactionism, "...meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he (sic) encounters" (p. 2). For Mary, the meaning attached to drinking was modified to the extent that she would no longer view it as an appropriate reward for studying.

All students interviewed by the author voiced similar sentiments with regards to the bearing alcohol and “partying” can have on academic performance. These comments, then, are consistent with the survey data reported in the literature; alcohol consumption is indeed correlated with collegiate academic performance. Yet, the literature only allows us to consider this correlation from the perspective of an outsider. Students with whom the author spoke were aware of this relationship on a personal level and, therefore, able to provide an insider’s view of this correlation and the meaning which they draw from it. Our resulting understanding of this student perspective and the process by which it evolves enables us to better comprehend the “maturing out” phenomenon mentioned earlier. This is consistent with viewing reality as a social construction.

However, while attempting to understand the traditional collegiate social practice of drinking as potentially hazardous to a student’s academic health, an interesting and, in as far as the literature on collegiate drinking is concerned, apparently unreported tactic of student adaptation was detected. As student stories concerning alcohol and academic life unfolded, a consistent maneuver surfaced by which interviewees attempted to assuage the impact of “partying” on their academic performance.

Learning that accomplishing the twin objectives of drinking late into the night, even if moderately, and being prepared for early classes the next day was not likely, students report turning to arranging their academic schedules so as to accommodate their social *and* academic objectives.

Alcohol and Pre-registration

With the possible exception of courses taken when first arriving on campus, students routinely participate in the selection of the classes they will take during the next academic period. Pre-registration is designed to involve collegians in the development of their own academic schedules, thereby increasing the extent to which they can exercise their voice in the determination of academic venue.

Ostensibly, this aspect of collegiate life enables students to select required courses taught by specific professors at various times so as to enhance the student’s opportunity to design an academic schedule with the greatest contribution to scholastic development.

Although this objective is realized, students reported an understanding of pre-registration that suggested it was more often viewed as a maneuver in collegiate social planning than an exercise in academic discovery. To be succinct, recognizing drinking’s proclivity to impact academic performance—and recalling the earlier cited equation for collegiate prosperity, that is, academic success plus having a good time equals collegiate prosperity—becomes one reason for students to exploit the process of pre-registration.

Students routinely informed the author of attempts at engineering an academic schedule that accommodates a desired social habit. The selection of courses

scheduled at specific times enabled students to keep portions or entire days free of classes following favored “nights out.” Further, pre-registration decisions would routinely be based on a given professor’s work requirements or policy on classroom attendance. It is this involvement of students in the orchestration of their academic schedule that appeared to be their attempt to level the playing field with regards to academic necessities and their designated approach to social success.

Although it could be argued that student efforts to pre-arrange their academic schedules are simply motivated by the late adolescent desire to sleep-in or garner a three-day weekend, student comments consistently included reference to “partying” as a factor in their pre-registration decisions. They indicated that difficulty getting up for early morning classes after drinking often prompted the effort to avoid such classes on specific days of the week. This is significant in that it suggests the meaning placed by students on pre-registration included the opportunity to adjust for at least one academic consequence of the priority placed on “partying.”

In this quote, a 19-year-old Biology major suggests this when she reports:

...there were times when I went out and drank and I just had like one too many, you know, just one, and then I’d miss my first-period class the next morning because I didn’t hear my alarm or something like that and that is bad. Like one time I went out before a test and didn’t do well on the test and I know I won’t do that any more.

What is significant here is that this student implies that in her case, it is not just the “...one too many...,” but the act of drinking and all it entails, for example, staying out late, that created her academic problem. If we are to draw our understanding of the correlation between alcohol and academic performance exclusively from survey results reported in the literature, it would appear that the physical effects of a central nervous system depressant rather than the behaviors associated with its consumption are to blame. Through comments such as this student’s we are introduced to the possibility that students, at some point in their collegiate drinking history, begin to understand the difference between “consuming alcohol” and “drinking.”

For this reason, their move is to accommodate the “drinking” rather than eliminate the “consumption.”

A student cited earlier in this chapter also spoke of the impact of partying on his academic performance. He too has used pre-registration as an opportunity to offset the consequences of an active social life:

F' s is open on Mondays and Thursdays, you know what I'm saying, and a lot of people go there so, people say, "Oh, I'll probably be going to F' s on Monday nights so I better not schedule class till 10:30 so I can get up for it". Or, "Yeah, I have to take this 8:30 class. Who's a good teacher?" and kids will say, "Oh, take this guy, he doesn't care if you come to class or no." I mean, people do do that. They set their school schedule around where they think they'll be. Like, you know, "Monday night football." That's the night we have beer and wings, you know, "Do you think I should schedule this 8:30 or not"? Hear what I'm saying? Yeah, get all your classes in the front of the week so we can lay-back the end of the week and go and have fun or something like that. I guarantee that almost everyone here at school will do that. They make their schedules around where they think their going to be. I mean, I did that myself. Like, I don't have any classes on Tuesday, like today.

It is such reasoning that prompts student to view pre-registration as the opportunity to assert some control over their academic schedule.

To disseminate the information needed to enable students to make these clandestine decisions about course times and professorial requirements necessitates an active and informed "grape vine." Although historically this was accomplished by way of small informal groups of students who would congregate to pool their collective knowledge of professors and specific course requirements, more and more students are using online resources like "rate my professors"—<http://www.ratemyprofessors.com>—to access this information. In addition, for this grape vine to be effective, its members must share similar priorities. The interaction between students in such groups reflects a similarity in the symbolic significance of the pre-registration process as a vehicle by which students can continue to assert their independence and maintain control over their personal freedom.

Here a twenty-two year-old senior anticipating graduation, exemplifies this entire process of using pre-registration in an attempt to bring one' s academic schedule into sync with a desired social calendar:

I didn't take any classes earlier than 10:30 this semester just because it was my last semester and I knew I'd be going out more. It's a hassle to come in a two o'clock in the morning and have to get up at eight. So I took later classes.

In this one simple statement, "It's a hassle...So I took later classes," Jay captures the essence of the student's view of pre-registration. It is the opportunity to assert individual control over one's academic schedule in order to accommodate a preferred approach to socializing. He continues:

As for teachers, you know, when those books (pre-registration course listings) come out, the first thing you do is you go to the cafeteria and look at the classes you have to take and ask everybody, "What's this teacher like? What's that teacher like?" And when guys say, "Don't take him," you cross his name off right there. And it's a process of elimination until you come to the teacher where everybody either says he's the coolest, the easiest, you know, he never shows up to class, he's always out, or something like that. It's rare that someone says, "Which teacher's going to make me work the hardest and spend my whole semester in the library?" I've never heard anyone talk like that!

Such considerations are clearly not part of the recognized intent of pre-registration. Again, the 19-year-old Bio major:

Usually with me and my friends, we try to schedule at least one day off so the night before we can have as our going-out night, our socializing night, and not have to worry about getting up for class the next morning. That way when we get up, we can still do homework all day.

I know a lot of kids that try and schedule later classes in case they go out, they won't miss their class. I mean, I think they want to go to class, but just some times... If I go out and I know I have an early morning class, I won't drink at all, you know, but just go home by a reasonable hour. But other times not and maybe miss the class or be really tired or I guess it all depends on the situation.

In comparing the comments of the previous male and female students, there is little variance between their views on this issue.

Conclusion

Although the published evidence linking student use of alcohol and academic performance suggests a negative correlation, there is no way to determine from the student perspectives cited in this chapter if it is the drinking that is the antecedent of the grades or the poor academic performance that triggers a particular pattern of use. It is tempting, however, to infer from the comments here that it is the former.

In addition, these students appear to view the act of drinking, or as many refer to it, "partying," and its academic consequences as resulting from more than just the pharmacological effects of the alcohol: This is significant. It suggests a somewhat complicated symbiotic relationship between the meaning students place on drinking. It is first, and arguably foremost, a way of asserting a student's personal freedom when in college. Next, alcohol is perceived as an appropriate vehicle to

assuage shyness and social inhibitions, or as was mentioned by one student in a previous chapter, “to be the person I want to be.” Lastly, alcohol is a key ingredient in realizing the second of the two primary objectives in pursuing a successful collegiate experience: Succeeding academically and having a good time while doing so. Interestingly, it appears that students are oblivious to this relationship initially upon entering college and only become aware of it as the semesters progress. This is additional evidence of the maturing out mentioned earlier as well as how students actively participate in the construction of their own collegiate reality.

Indications are that students not only eventually perceive a direct and negative correlation between partying and their academic performance, but believe that its drinking and associated behaviors such as staying out late with resulting difficulty in getting up for early classes, incomplete preparation of assignments, being unprepared for examinations, or impaired judgment, result in predictable difficulty with academic performance. It would appear that students are aware—or at least rapidly become aware—of the indirect as well as direct consequences of drinking on their academic performance.

Another interesting student perspective comes into focus as we consider the meaning students place on the process of pre-registration. It would appear that students view this process as the opportunity to address the perceived cause-and-effect relationship between the cherished collegiate social of partying and the equally important academic objective of earning “good grades.” By interacting with peers holding similar views, in small, informal focus groups and/or utilizing online services like “ratemyprofessors.com” and utilizing the information provided to manipulate their academic schedules via a process of pre-registering, students are able to synchronize their academic schedule with a desired social schedule. In other words, as students become increasingly aware of the impact of pursuing their goal of social success on the equally important goal of academic success, pre-registration is a frequent first effort to ensuring the opportunity to “have one’s cake and eat it too.”

Returning to the theory of symbolic interactionism, it would appear that these students are not simply automatons that have been programmed with the demands and constraints of the collegiate environment in which they are to function.

Neither are they apparently stubbornly committed to their pre-admission expectations of alcohol and drinking. Rather, they present themselves as conscious, willing individuals, albeit egocentric, who continually create and re-create themselves and their environment through an ongoing process of interaction. It is through their association with one another and the experiences they realize that they both establish meaning for the particulars of their existence on campus and re-evaluate that meaning on an on-going basis. So the student who enters college the first semester expecting to “party hardy” *and* perform well academically, if not exceptionally, discovers by interacting with peers and through personal experience as the semesters pass that these are not necessarily

mutually inclusive objectives. Consequently, changes in the meaning placed on alcohol, its consumption, and the way in which these staples of collegiate life are folded into the totality of a collegiate experience take place¹⁸.

The reported relationship between alcohol and academics, while important in its bearing upon a student's collegiate experience, highlights a separate and distinct issue that students address in their comments, namely, underage drinking. In the next chapter, this issue will be explored in greater detail. Included in this consideration of student insights is continued regard for the changes students make in their understanding of alcohol specifically and of drinking in general.

With the majority of undergraduate day students falling between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two years, a relatively small proportion of that population are of legal age to purchase or consume alcohol. Consequently, a consideration of student stories relating to alcohol's role in the collegiate experience must necessarily address the issue of underage drinking.

¹⁸ The reader is again referred to Appendix A to review the changes between *entering* and *experienced* student perspectives on alcohol and drinking.

Alcohol and Under Age Drinking

...It doesn't matter what age you are. Beer stores around here just don't card many people so you can go buy alcohol and you can go to (a Greek party), you can go up to B Street and get the little Pennsylvania ID which says you are twenty-one and use that at like (Greek parties) where you have to show an ID that says you're twenty-one (Twenty-year-old third-year student)

Introduction

Traditionally, students enter college following their senior year of high school. Most are eighteen years of age as they become first-year students and tend to graduate four years later at age twenty-two. This being the case, with all States currently requiring a minimum age of twenty-one for the purchase of alcoholic beverages, all first-year students, most sophomores, and some juniors, have yet to reach the age of majority and therefore are under the minimum age to legally purchase or consume alcohol. Yet, students routinely suggest that alcohol is not only consumed regularly, but remains a significant factor in the collegiate experiences even when considering the majority of undergraduates in this country are under the age of twenty-one. In short, with the majority of American college students drinking, the majority do so illegally. Consequently, with approximately two-thirds of students at traditional four year institutions being under the age of 21 and upwards of 90% reporting drinking at least monthly at colleges and universities in the Northeast, it would appear that underage drinking is not only a regular behavior but is a staple in the typical undergraduate approach to socializing.

Obtaining Alcohol When Underage

With a consistent minimum purchase age in place for each of the 50 states with a somewhat more diverse variety of legislation enacted regarding underage procurement, possession, and drinking in each state, it would appear that an awareness of the importance of alcohol's availability for college students has been clearly demonstrated. Further, it would seem evident that students have indicated their personal priorities regarding the choice between drinking and the laws specific to legal age by choosing to ignore if not defy legislation prohibiting the purchase, possession, or use of alcohol by those under twenty-one. This propensity to overlook if not disregard a given state's statutes concerning possession and/or use of alcohol is another factor frequently cited by those suggesting that underage drinking specifically and collegiate drinking in general is a persistent problem.

Be this as it may, the prevalence of underage consumption does not, in and of itself, help us to appreciate the dilemma face by individual students when considering this choice between drinking and the law. Neither does it enable us to

understand how, if a decision is made to drink when under twenty-one, individual students effectively circumvent the social and legal mechanisms designed to restrict their access to and consumption of alcohol. An overly simplistic approach to underage drinking is to label the behavior as illegal if not pernicious and based on this determination, identify it as a behavior that needs to be controlled, that is *eliminated*. Interestingly, to deem a behavior aberrant simply because it defies established legal mores may clearly categorize that behavior as problematic in the eyes of those observing the behavior, but alienate those performing the behavior. Put another way, *because* so many underage individuals choose to defy the law and drink one can discern that the very laws being defied are viewed as the arbitrary and capricious dictates of those in power, designed to stifle the rights and deny privilege to those devoid of power. This sets the stage for a classic social psychological reaction known as “reactance.”

Reactance theory essentially states that if an individual or group perceives that personal actions have been unfairly restricted—unfair meaning the restriction singles out a particular group, is not equitably enforced or is simply viewed as too harsh—then a condition of reactance is triggered. Once triggered there are only two ways the restricted individual can act: (1) to work to undo the unfair restriction or (2) subvert the unfair restriction. Although it can be argued that individuals of voting age can affect legislation regarding the minimum purchase/drinking age, this has not historically be the approach of most underage drinkers to addressing their upset with such laws. Although there is a growing movement in the country to revisit the existing laws in question and pursue a reduction in the minimum drinking age, more often than not, the more likely approach to registering their upset has been for underage individuals to simply subvert or defy the law or laws in question. It is this second response to existing minimum age legislation that presents the quicker, easier means by which to register one’s disdain with the law.

When asked about underage drinking, students reported that a decision to subvert the under age legislation of the state or alcohol policies of the school in which they are matriculated necessitates finding ways to obtain alcohol *illegally*. As a result, part of the negotiation of a new environment when entering college includes the location of someone of age who can and will purchase the alcohol and/or to locate a place in which underage students will be served without scrupulous consideration of their proof of age. Such places most frequently include private parties or bars with lax enforcement of minimum age legislation. In addition, as familiarity with the collegiate environment grows, yet another avenue to securing alcoholic beverages materializes, namely the retailer who does not verify age before making a sale. As we consider student comments regarding all of these approaches to securing alcohol, it becomes evident that obtaining alcohol is work which students willingly embrace, in part because of the perceived right to drink and in part because obstructions to their doing so legally are perceived as unfair and discriminatory.

Regardless of which approach to procurement a student employs, all necessitate some basic familiarity with the environment in which the alcohol is to be consumed. This is frequently accomplished within days of arrival on campus and the author has routinely been informed by students that it was hours between when they arrived on campus and when they had their first drink as a collegian:

See, my freshman year when none of my roommates were twenty-one, we met friends who were twenty-one at the time and if we ever needed something... I mean, there's a couple places around here that don't even ask for some form of ID, you just walk up and get alcohol. And we didn't know that at the time and they'd just go, "Oh, you just go up here and you can get it." Once we got referred to that we hardly had any problems at all. Any time we wanted to go out, we'd just go to a certain place and pick it up ourselves.

But I'd say, when you make friends that are twenty-one you can go right to them right away...nobody has problems getting you beer. What I've heard, I'm not twenty-one yet, you know, but people say that when they were under twenty-one they knew how it felt so you know, they'll go out and get it for you. (a twenty year old third-year student)

While most contemporary students will indicate having experimented with alcohol in high school, recalling the confluence of being new on campus, unfamiliar with the social milieu, and looking for the opportunity to drink, added an extra sense of empathy on the part of returning students for new first-year students.

It is interesting to note that the act of procurement becomes as much a social "ice breaker" as the drinking itself. The desire to drink by the student under twenty-one and the willingness to get the alcohol for the underage student by the returning student of legal age result in a social contact that most likely would not have taken place had it not been for the common ground provided by the desire to obtain alcohol. Whether or not this is the intention of the underage student is not something that can be inferred from the quotes cited in this monograph. However, the desire to obtain the alcohol is apparently sufficient to coax the anxious first-year student to approach an older peer while the older student's affinity for the plight of the minor results in an interaction that most likely would not have taken place were it not for the desired drink. This becomes another, albeit minor, example of the extent to which students employ alcohol as a social lubricant and symbolically interpret it as a talisman, capable of securing social opportunity.

Many students who are of age recall their difficulty in purchasing beer and as a result readily assist their under age acquaintances in securing alcohol. Because this does not necessitate a close personal bond before the student of age will agree to purchase the alcohol for the minor, a student can approach almost anyone on

campus twenty-one or older and expect to receive assistance in buying beer or at the least, advice about how such a purchase can be made. This has become such an underlying part of the campus culture as to be all but an unwritten law for returning students.

The learning curve is quite short for underage students who discover where alcohol can be purchased without identification. Here a twenty-two year old senior recounts his experience as a minor when negotiating this aspect of campus life during his first year:

At first, when you come in, it (getting beer) might be a problem for the first couple weeks. But there's always someone who finds out where you can get beer underage, a distributor, at a bar or wherever. So, I mean, once that place is found, word spreads like wild fire through the dorms and everybody knows where this place is within 2 or 3 weeks. So you can go up to B Street there and get one of them Pennsylvania ID's and that'll get you in a place like the H., or it used to, I don't know if it still does. Or you can go to a local beer distributor where they might not even card you, you just walk up, pay the guy and walk out. So it's not that difficult to get beer.

"...once that place is found, word spreads like wild fire..." In these words is implied the single fastest form of campus communication, the "grape vine." This is an effective vehicle for the rapid distribution of information. As with so many issues related to student comfort or the negotiation of obstacles in the path of social success, the student cited above succinctly emphasizes the value of the rapid distribution of information regarding retailers who do not require proof-of-age identification prior to selling alcohol. This information is highly coveted and makes the rounds of an undergraduate residence hall as quickly as if posted on the computerized message center in the main resident dining hall.

As these students begin to share the subtleties of what is involved in obtaining alcohol when under the minimum purchase age, we begin to see the work that is involved. It is almost as if students add one more task to their list of required duties when making the transition to college: (1) explore new environment; (2) make friends; (3) get beer.

In this brief comment, the underage woman cited in the opening comment to this chapter essentially notes the lack of problem presented by not having identification and the insignificance of obstacles to minors who wish to drink:

... "mom and pops" (convenience stores) serve anyone. You could probably be twelve and go in there and buy whatever you'd like.

Not unlike the older student's willingness to assist in purchasing alcohol, students who have already discovered where alcohol can be purchased without identification (ID) readily place this information on the grape vine. We can almost hear this student's lack of concern for the minimum purchase age laws of Pennsylvania. Citing this student again:

Because there have to be other people on your floor who know about them and they'd probably say, "Oh, do you want to go in on some beer with us? We're getting a case tonight?" And then you'd ask where they were going and then you'd know for future reference and you can go get it.

This matter-of-fact discovery of where alcohol can be purchased under age is the primary way that such establishments are uncovered by students. Mary's comments are representative of disclosures made by students throughout the interviews in this study. While the site of this study was located in Philadelphia, a large city likely to have such lax, if not negligent, entrepreneurs, such places are unlikely to be a vehicle for under age drinking unique to this school.

False Identification

In states with a minimum purchase age, circumventing the age restrictions to drinking is of significant importance to college students. False identification, or as they refer to it, fake ID, is some form of bogus documentation that indicates the bearer to have reached the age of majority and is thereby entitled to purchase alcohol.

If the student is twenty-one years old then no problem exists. If requested, that student simply displays any official identification that attests to his/her age and that individual is afforded the rights and amenities appropriate for that aged individual. When a student is under twenty-one, however, an attempt to brandish such identification is tantamount to fraud, as identification is produced that contains altered and therefore false information. The use of another's identification, albeit of the same gender, racial group, address or like shared characteristic, in order to intentionally subjugate laws regarding the sale of alcoholic beverages is equally fraudulent.

Yet this being said, the significance of alcohol and importance of being able to identify how it will be procured make this quest an involved operation. In many ways, obtaining beer is a point of considerable anxiety, especially for the first-year student, as it is perceived as the necessary prerequisite of a "good time":

Like the first question that's always asked is, "Who's getting the alcohol? Who's getting the beer? Who has the ID to get the beer?" It seems like, seems like a very important question. I mean people assume it's necessary to have a good time. They instantly have to

have beer when they have a good time during the weekends. (a twenty-one year old senior)

As cooperative as peers may be in this quest to obtain beer, it still involves planning, information, determination, and resource. In short, obtaining the alcohol to consume, for whatever purpose, is not necessarily a simple job. It is work and students both recognize this and rise to the challenge necessary to see the task through.

Students indicated that fake ID was of importance to them for one of several specific reasons. First, and perhaps most obvious, it was reported as an important tool in the purchase of alcohol for personal use while in college. Even with the alcohol as prominently available on campus at “buy-a-cup-at-the-door-and-drink-all-night” parties, the opportunity to purchase alcohol at will and without the added step of involving a twenty-one year old intermediary or having to secure transportation to get to a distributor some distance from campus was reported as quite attractive.

Second, students spoke of possessing a fake ID as if it were a membership card to a coveted club. It was referred to as though it exuded status to the bearer. Even though the ID may be rarely if ever used, having it represented a sense of social significance to the student struggling to assert an image of independence on the college or university campus. Like a doctor's stethoscope or cleric's collar, the fake ID is a symbol of one's position as “college student.”

Third, a fake ID is to the underage collegian as a bogus passport may be to an international criminal, it allows access to places otherwise off-limits to the bearer. In the case of the underage student, these places would be the bars and taverns where so many of their “of-age” peers congregate to socialize and enjoy the social amenities of collegiate life. This is one underage woman's perspective as she comments on the importance of having identification when under twenty-one:

If everyone's going to F's, and you're not twenty-one and don't have ID, you can't go. Or if everyone's going to a bar, you can't go. Like, even so much the fraternity, if they card, you can't go. You can't get in if you don't have an ID so it limits you.

Again we see the student's response to the confluence of alcohol's perceived social significance, the desire to be with one's friends (even if not drinking personally), and the significance of “proper” identification. Put another way, this woman is saying that alcohol can do for her what she would have much greater difficulty doing alone, that is, facilitate socializing. Peers and their behaviors are an important factor in the social decisions of college students and an ID is the passport which will enable this to all come together. This represents a great deal of symbolic significance being placed on the alcohol if not the ID as well. As

suggested earlier, alcohol and the ID that enables its purchase are the talismans that ensure collegiate social success.

When considering the significance of fake ID's for students, the question of type and source surface frequently. Most students state that while a fraudulently obtained but otherwise legitimate ID was the most coveted form of bogus identification, the difficulty and/or expense of obtaining such would generally preclude its being available.

When asked about preferred types of identification, an underage male student reported:

A duplicate license, taking someone's information over to like motor vehicles and saying you lost your license or something like that. A person like memorizes all the other persons pertinent information in case they ask you a question. The duplicate license is big because you register with the State and it has your picture on it and you can't be questioned with it. Fake, like the ones people try to make themselves, there's always something wrong with that so that works up to a certain point and then sooner or later it gets taken- someone notices that there's something wrong with it. Then there's that Broad Street thing, that really doesn't do you that much.
(a twenty year old junior)¹⁹

Even with this risk of confiscation, students generally alter existing personal identification or purchase bogus photo identification. While this identification is acquired from vendors in the city and has no official status, it is often acceptable at fraternity functions and neighborhood bars where asking for identification is little more than a show of compliance with the law and there is no real attempt to establish authenticity of the proof-of-age offered. The joke on some campuses is that unofficial ID can be obtained, "For \$20 and a note from your mother."

It is not uncommon to read or hear in the media about a "sting operation" that results in the arrest of a group of students at some college or university who were selling bogus state drivers licenses. Often such operations are short lived and involve several students who were able to obtain a quantity of blank state driver's license blanks and the necessary computer equipment to generate the counterfeit licenses. At the time of one such arrest in the Philadelphia area, students were busing students to their operation in a Philadelphia hotel and producing the phony licenses at the rate of one every 10 minutes for hundreds of dollars apiece.

¹⁹ This approach to obtaining a false drivers license duplicate has all but disappeared. With digital photography resulting in one's original photo being stored for just such occasions and improvements in the technology used to produce drivers licenses, e.g., holographic images, etc., making licenses state-of-the-art, false official documents are far more difficult to obtain and very expensive when they are.

This importance of having false identification is underscored by this a sophomore's comments:

You don't have to have it (false identification), but it's good. ... for someone like myself again, being in a fraternity, I didn't need it because there were always people that were twenty-one who could go out and get two cases of beer or thirty cases of beer, they could always go out and get it because they had ID while somebody who's a freshman in the dorm living in (names a specific residence hall) they're going to have to have a friend that has a fake ID if their going to want to get beer. I know people in the dorms where the first things they do when they get to college, the first thing they want to do is get a fake ID so they can go out to bars and things like that.

The significance placed on being able to obtain alcohol is truly reflected in the statement, "...the first thing they want to do is get a fake ID so they can go out to bars..." This indicates the extent to which drinking is an important symbol of collegiate life and has been elevated to a position of prominence in the student's social hierarchy.

Again, this student speaks of the importance of identification if the underage student wishes to drink in a bar, but reminds us that "bar drinking" is only one avenue to a student's use of alcohol:

If you want to get in a bar, you pretty much have to have a fake ID. Whereas if you want to go to a party on campus, like a townhouse party or a party in the apartments, all you need is somebody to buy the beer for you. Or even, people hosting the party will buy the beer for you. You don't even need to do anything; all you need to do is show up!

But if not all drinking done by students less than twenty-one is in bars, is the possession of such identification of equal importance to all students under the legal drinking age? While listening to students discuss this issue, it became obvious that fake ID's, while important to all, is of particular importance to some.

False Identification for Returning Students

In the first monograph in this series (cite the name and site) a difference between the first- and second-year students approach to collegiate drinking and that of their third- and fourth-year peers was outlined. To recapitulate, whether sponsored by an established and familiar organization like a fraternity or simply an impromptu gathering in a resident hall room, student sponsored social functions at on- or off-campus parties provided the most frequent opportunity for first- and second-year students to drink.

For the eighteen and nineteen year old student, this was reported to present little if any inconvenience as it was the preferred mode of socializing and consequently imbibing for this campus age group. On the other hand, students often suggest a more complicated processing of social options, particularly for those students just shy of their twenty-first birthdays. For these students, many with friends twenty-one years of age or above, their twenty-one year old or older friend's proclivity to socialize in off-campus bars and clubs presented an added incentive to obtain quality false identification. For these students, they must pass for twenty-one or be left behind socially.

Here a twenty year old sophomore woman addresses this particular issue of age in her comments when asked about the relative importance of false identification for the student under twenty-one:

If you hang out with an older group, it might be more important to have fake ID. If they like to go into Center City, to South Street, then you need ID and it might be more important. I don't have one right now and my friends like to go into South Street on Thursday and I wish I had one, it would make it easier.

It is the added frustration of being unable to socialize with one's friends because of their propensity to go places which requires legal proof-of-age that makes false identification that much more important to the twenty year old collegian.

As students generally do not turn twenty-one until their third year of college, having access to false ID may well be a required precursor to successful collegiate socializing even for juniors. This twenty-year-old junior makes this very point in her comments regarding the importance and type of identification to be used:

It depends where you want to go. Around here, parties or like the H. or up to F's, it's no problem. You can borrow somebody's whose twenty-one, you know? I know people who even used to white-out their last number (on a school ID) and change it or something ridiculous. It's not that difficult, and it makes it a lot easier. It depends on where you want to go to.

If you want to go to a party, you go up to Broad Street and get a state ID that you fill out yourself. But there's not really many places that take them. Once you hit your junior year, you have a lot of friends who are seniors and it's harder for them because they tend to go to the bars and that kind of leaves you behind if you're not twenty-one or you don't have the ID.

“...they tend to go to the bars and that kind of leaves you behind if you're not twenty-one or you don't have the ID.” This is a significant statement in that this student has rationalized the need for bogus identification because of its ability to ensure continued access to her friends of age. Because they choose to go where

alcohol is available and because she chooses to socialize with them, she in essence is acknowledging alcohol as a pre-requisite of social success whether she drinks or not.

It is interesting, and I might add, representative of student perspectives on this topic, that this student's suggestion that while a drinking related establishment may be the destination of a group of students, it is not so much the intention to consume alcohol as it is the desire to remain with one's friends in an establishment that serves alcohol that elevates the false ID to such lofty status for the twenty-year-old. As a result, it is empowered with symbolic significance.

This viewpoint is echoed by one of the male students cited earlier:

My freshman year we were basically into what's going on on campus. We didn't basically think about bars too much. We wanted to meet as many people as we could and go to different places. Sophomore year, friends that I used to hang out with who were sophomore and junior, they turned twenty-one and started to go out to the bars and stuff and would tell us about it and we're like, "Wow, we should go check it out." I think it depends on your friends. If you friends are twenty-one they're going to tell you what a great time they had and all of a sudden, like, "Wow, I want to go try it." So you try and get some type of fake ID so you can go out to the bars.

Again as noted in these student comments, they imply that the desire to socialize with one's peers, many of whom may be twenty-one or older, is more a factor in the importance of false identification for the twenty-year-old student than is the intent to drink. This is not to say that these students do not drink or do not become intoxicated. But it is meant to suggest that, to all intents and purposes, the ID becomes a passport to social success, at least for those underage students interviewed who had friends of age.

While students tend to report that returning students are as likely as their first-year peers to drink and incorporate alcohol into their social plans, the venue for their pursuits is frequently, different. More often, a public bar or nightclub is the location of choice for older students to congregate socially. As a result, underage students who wish to frequent such places in order to socialize with their of-age peers are subject to a closer scrutiny of the statutes governing the sale of alcohol than they might be at a campus fraternity party or off-campus private party.

Conclusion

Students assign three varied, but related meanings to false identification. First, and perhaps most obviously, it is a means to the procurement of alcohol for the underage collegian. This is almost certainly the meaning most adults are likely to

attach to an underage collegian's reasons for possessing a false ID and is consistent with what we find in the literature on this subject.

And what of the work involved in procuring alcohol when under age? When the steps necessary to secure alcohol when under twenty-one (i.e. locating someone of age who purchase alcohol for you, identifying establishments which will serve minors or at least not check ID, financing and obtaining a fake ID) are considered, this process represents a good deal of work. Unlike the decision to have a beer which is offered to you when at a party, the decision to secure one's supply for an outing takes planning, commitment, follow-through, and resources. The fact that students are prepared to go through one or more of these steps, especially obtaining permanent false identification, is testimony to the significance of alcohol to the underage collegian.

However obvious this first meaning may appear, the second and third meanings these students shared only surface when we consider their insider's view of the issues of underage drinking in a collegiate environment. The second meaning attributed to "fake ID" is that of personal identity. Whether the ID would be used for the expressed purpose of purchasing alcohol or gaining entry to a bar or tavern, actually possessing one's own fake ID appears to be part of the "uniform" of the first- or second- year student. It becomes an identifying collegiate characteristic, a "proof of membership" of sorts, not unlike the hard hat is to a construction worker or tattoo to a sailor. Most especially, for first- and second-year students, it symbolizes the independence and freedom of collegiate life and the importance attributed to alcohol in realizing such.

Thirdly, and perhaps of greatest significance when considering insider perspectives on collegiate drinking, false identification appears to symbolizes a passport that enables the underage student to accompany friends of age when they travel off-campus to frequent bars or clubs. Where the first- or second-year student can drink and socialize with peers on or around campus at "speakeasies," the twenty-year-old third-year student is often faced with one of three choices: (1) obtain false identification; (2) be excluded from socializing with one's peers of age when going to a drinking emporium; or, (3) cause the alteration of the group's plans to frequent a bar or tavern to accommodate one's being under age. The former would seem to represents the course of least resistance for the students interviewed in this study.

Related to the phenomenon of "maturing out" discussed in greater detail in monograph 3 (cite name and site), it would seem the underage returning student's tendency to socialize off-campus with friends of age necessitates having access to false identification. This is especially important for the twenty-year-old junior. As students twenty-one years and older seek the relative sophistication of the off-campus bar or nightclub, their twenty year old acquaintances are faced with a choice between obtaining false identification or being left behind.

Considered arbitrary and capricious by most students, it is not surprising to find the twenty-one year old minimum drinking age an insufficient legal deterrent to curb consumption by the typical underage collegian. What is interesting however, when considering the use of false identification by the undergraduate collegian, is the extent to which the desire to socialize with one's own peer group, rather than the desire to drink in public, appears to be a student's primary motivation to obtain and use false identification in overt disregard for the legal statutes governing the sale of alcohol. As a matter of fact, not once has the author heard a student mention more than a token concern about violating the law in the quest to obtain or consume alcohol while in college, and this regarding the inconvenience if cost rather than the consequence or shame.

Coincidental to this consideration of the legal statutes regarding minimum purchase age is the implied message that if one is mature enough to drink when twenty-one, then one must, necessarily, be too immature to drink when under age. This raises an interesting question: If students interact with a culture that regards those under twenty-one as too immature to exercise responsibility when drinking, what does this suggest about how the "adults" in that culture and its "students" differ in their perception of what constitutes a problem?

Untoward Consequences of Collegiate Drinking

That bad things happen to good people is a truism that is difficult for any reader to deny. We all have likely known someone to whom a “bad thing” has happened while knowing the individual was a “good person.” As regards underage and collegiate drinking, this adage is equally true. As a matter of fact, most students the author has interviewed over the years have at least known of another student, a “good person,” who experienced “something bad” as the result of drinking, frequently in high school..

Since the publication of the first report on the Harvard *College Alcohol Study* in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) in December of 1994, there have been numerous and regular publications, both scholarly and informational, regarding the untoward consequences of underage and collegiate drinking. Consequently, it is not the intent of this section of the monograph to review examples of such consequences with which the reader is likely all too familiar—alcohol induced violence, poor academic performance, sexual assault, vandalism, “celebratory riots,” and the like. Rather, this section will address the more subtle or covert consequences of drinking that are likely to bring the typical or *average* college student to a point where he or she reevaluates the importance of drinking in the pursuit of a successful collegiate social life.

It has been reported in the literature, including the first two monographs of the *When They Drink* series that students tend to “mature out” of many of their high-risk collegiate behaviors, including drinking, over the first several semesters of a collegiate career. In the preface to the first monograph in this series, the author outlined how student perspectives on alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior change significantly over the first three to four semesters of a college career. Whether these changes are due to experience and learning related to drinking, basic issues of human development, or a combination of the two, the point remains: Students moderate their drinking behavior naturally regardless of what administrators or legislators do. The quest in addressing the prevention of high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking is therefore not so much to eliminate it as to hasten this naturally occurring phenomenon that has become known as “maturing out.”

As horrific or tragic as the more widely publicized consequences of collegiate drinking may be—the deaths, rapes, or other extraordinarily sad or horrific consequences—these fortunately remain relatively rare. When considering that there are more than 15 million students matriculated in institutions of higher education and with something approaching 80% of these students reporting at least occasional drinking, it is almost surprising that *more* of these horrific incidents do not occur each year. Even if the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism’s (NIAAA)²⁰ statistics on alcohol-related deaths and

²⁰ The U.S. Senate has passed a bill that will change the name of NIAAA but such has yet to take effect as of this writing. The new name will be National Institute on Alcohol Disorders and Health (NIADH).

sexual assaults are accurate²¹, its suggestion that 1,700 alcohol-related deaths and 97,000 sexual assaults²² involving college students occur each year represents 6.6% of the collegiate population experience such untoward incidents. This does not negate the fact that such numbers are tragic, but it does suggest that for the maturing out effect that is witnessed in all students to occur, there are likely more untoward consequences of collegiate drinking that affect student choices about drinking than those that make the six o'clock news. It is these consequences that are the focus of this section.

Lesser Known Untoward Consequences Affecting the Drinker

In the introduction to this monograph it was suggested that what causes a problem *is* a problem when it causes problems. Until this correlation is realized, however, it is likely that established student behaviors will continue if not be expanded. Consequently, for the student who views drinking as both a time-honored rite of passage as well as a desirable past time, this behavior is viewed as intrinsically rewarding, that is, the benefit received by engaging in the behavior outweigh the cost incurred by its pursuit.

In the first monograph in this series, it was suggested that first-year students tend to view alcohol as a necessary and sufficient component of having a good time in college. In fact, the students views reported suggested that the opportunity to drink itself *was* the good time²³. Even when students are informed of the risks associated with collegiate drinking, they are savvy enough to know that the likelihood that they will personally experience a negative consequence beyond the occasional hangover, vomiting experience, or perhaps missed class is quite low. If we as professionals know that only most students drink but less than 10% experience the more notorious untoward consequences of drinking, so too do contemporary collegians know this fact as well.

Contemporary collegians know that the vast majority of collegiate drinkers do not experience untoward consequences when they imbibe. They likewise realize that the majority of their peers report experiencing neutral if not positive consequences as the result of their consumption, benefits that certainly offset the perceived inconvenience of a hangover or missed class. This only serves to reinforce their assuming that collegiate drinking is, to use the vernacular, *cool*. It is not until repeated individual consequences of excessive collegiate drinking are viewed in the context of time over the span of several months if not semesters that the student begins to speculate that a connection exists between this drinking and what that student has come to recognize as *problems*.

So what might these untoward consequences of collegiate drinking be that can affect a student's decision about drinking? What happens that prompts the maturing college student to revisit the previously desired behavior and reevaluate its cost-benefit ratio?

²¹ Questions have been raised regarding the means by which these figures were identified casting some doubt as to their veracity. See a Fox News article by William Milloy at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,50104,00.html>, last accessed 19 July 2007.

²² See "A Snapshot of Annual High-Risk College Drinking Consequences"

On the NIAAA *College Drinking Prevention* website -

<http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/StatsSummaries/snapshot.aspx>, last accessed 19 July 2007

²³ See Appendix I for the chart comparing *novice student* and *experienced student* perspectives on alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior from Monograph #1 in the *When They Drink* series

The answer, in part, echoes back to points made in the second monograph, *When they drink: Deconstructing collegiate alcohol use*²⁴. In that tome, it was suggested that frequently repeated behaviors may become so routine as to become unconscious and therefore automatic. Something is required to jog the student drinker in such a way as to bring this automatic, repetitive pattern of behavior back into consciousness in order for it to be reevaluated. It is only then that the student can determine if the current cost/benefit ratio warrants a continuation of the routine behavior. It is the untoward consequences discussed in this section that likely contribute significantly to the *wake-up call* that prompts a reconsideration of the benefits of drinking.

In the twenty-plus years the author has dealt with college students, there have been more than few who have experienced the more recognizable untoward consequences of drinking. It has been, however, the routine or minor consequences, those that some might call *to be expected* that facilitate the tipping point where students decide that to continue as in the past is more hassle than to change in the present. As with any change, individuals pass through stages of readiness. From a total lack of awareness, what some might call denial, through a gradual increase in awareness that something may need to change eventually, the student becomes more aware of the costs and benefits associated with a personal behavior. Eventually this awareness reaches a critical mass, a *tipping point* as Malcolm Gladwell calls it, and change happens. Interestingly, this change occurs generally without formal treatment or counseling services and is the result of a personal choice to move towards a new way of life rather than away from an old one.

These “everyday” untoward consequences that capture a student’s attention and heighten awareness that “change is good,” come in many types and varieties. As a matter of fact, the list is probably only limited by the individual definitions of what constitutes an untoward consequence...one student’s untoward consequence is another student’s pratfall or humorous war story. What remains constant for all these incidents, however, is the fact that they are viewed as increasingly untoward and that they come to be recognized as being precipitated by drinking.

Common examples include embarrassment and regret that result from things said or done while under the influence. Again, what is embarrassing for one student may be viewed as playful behavior by another. The fact remains, however, that when *something done* is perceived as *embarrassing* or *regretful* and related to drinking, this can prompt a student to revisit his or her personal choices about drinking. For example, a common phenomenon in today’s fast-paced, digitally enhanced electronic world is ease by which one can share/post embarrassing information when intoxicated. “Drunk calls” made at three in the morning, photos taken on a camera phone and posted on FaceBook—whether of the drinker or taken by him/her—or email that is answered with suggestive, abusive, or racist language, all increase the likelihood of doing something embarrassing and leaving electronic fingerprints when under the influence. The “walk of shame” or tendency to return to one’s campus residence or apartment after having “hooked-up” with someone hardly known if not totally distasteful is another example of how alcohol can contribute to the embarrassment and/or regrets a student may come to recognize are alcohol related.

²⁴ Insert URL to online copy of the monograph

A mainstay of drinking by first-year students on campuses across the country is the off-campus speakeasy. This is the off-campus party, generally held in the residence of several students or in a Greek lettered organization when the price of admission is “X” dollars to purchase a 16-oz plastic cup from which the student can drink from a keg all evening. Such gatherings, called keg parties or “keggers” by some, are attractive because they are consistent with the *Animal House* expectations of some students and they afford the underage drinker the opportunity to fly under the radar of the licensed establishment that may require proper identification. These parties are cheap, convenient, and easy to find. Anyone who has ever been to such a party can attest to the fact that if you have been to one of these events you have been to all of these events. Along with the cookie-cutter profile of such parties, many experienced students talk about growing tired of the incessant noise, sophomoric behavior of attendees, and the other generally untenable attributes of such parties: Long lines for the single bathroom and its deplorable condition when finally getting in; having beer spilled on your clothes or in your hair; being “groped” by intoxicated peers; individuals becoming sick, obnoxious, or violent. Although many students who tire of this type of venue will continue to drink when they socialize, they will tend to do so in settings that are less conducive to drunken comportment and often in a more moderate and responsible fashion. To the extent that a student is one of the attendees at a “kegger” that engages in the sophomoric behavior or is otherwise involved in activities that are better forgotten the next day, this can contribute to the embarrassment, regrets, or shame experienced by students that can contribute to revisiting the decision to drink.

An often overlooked but nonetheless disconcerting consequence of collegiate drinking is the propensity to loss things when drinking. From cell phones, keys, pagers, and other trappings of a 21st century lifestyle to eyeglasses, retainers, dental bridges, jewelry, and items of clothing, students who drink tend to *lose their stuff*. Who has not lost keys, a wallet, or eyeglasses or other personal items? It is a hassle and may be costly, but generally, it is the result of circumstances that are unrelated to our having been intoxicated. Students who drink to a point of vomiting, however, and then lose their dental work in the commode or who blackout only to find their eyeglasses, earrings, watches, or wallets missing when they “awaken” represent a very different type of loss.

The list of everyday untoward consequences of collegiate drinking is likely endless. Anything perceived as unfortunate, a hassle, disconcerting, upsetting, or distressing *and* related to one’s drinking can result in coming to a point where the automatic decision to drink—or at least the routine way in which this drinking is done when the decision is made—is called into question. It is only human nature to reconsider the utility of repeating a behavior that ceases to deliver rewards or when the realized rewards are overshadowed by the untoward consequences also associated with the behavior. It is this that will affect one’s personal choices about drink and can contribute to the maturing out effect mentioned earlier.

Untoward Consequences for the Bystander

As drinking for most college students is a social act, *bystanders* refers to those who happen to be with or in the vicinity or otherwise come into contact with the drinker while engaging in that social activity. These bystanders may also be individuals who happen to encounter the student following the drinking and while still under the influence, or who experience the consequences of the drinker's consumption. Consequently, bystanders may be roommates, house or floor mates, or members of the campus community including staff and faculty of the institution. In short, bystanders are any individuals who directly or indirectly have their lives impacted by the consequences of a collegiate drinker.

As with the untoward consequences experienced by the drinker, there are well known consequences experienced by bystanders that will not be discussed at this time as they are so well known as to be assumed familiar to the reader. For example, the victim(s) of sexual or other forms of violence and the victim(s) of drinking and driving mishaps are well known bystanders. There are, however, other untoward consequences of collegiate drinking that are suffered by bystanders on a regular basis. These can be so frequent or profound as to affect the very quality of life for the bystander at a particular college or university, perhaps to the extent that the bystander reconsiders a decision to live on campus if not remain at the institution.

It should be mentioned that with approximately 80% of college students drinking at least periodically during their collegiate lives, many of the bystanders discussed in this section are drinkers themselves. It is important to understand that one may be a drinker and a bystander, perhaps simultaneously. However, even though one underage student may understand and even condone the drinking of an underage peer simply because the bystander drinks him or herself, this does not preclude that the underage drinker may experience the untoward consequence of a peer's drinking. To be more succinct, I may be fine with ignoring institutional policy about underage use but nonetheless upset when another drinker negatively impacts my life with his or her drinking.

Examples of *bystander effects* of collegiate drinking include a number of nuisance consequences that directly affect a quality of life in many collegiate residence facilities. From fire alarms being set off at early morning hours necessitating the evacuation of residence facilities to the discharge of fire extinguishers by intoxicated students to community bathrooms fouled by intoxicated students, the examples of untoward consequences of collegiate drinking for bystanders are not difficult to identify. While discussing collegiate drinking with students over the years, the author was repeatedly told of such consequences. Add to this the impact such behavior represents for housekeeping staff and those who are working security, particularly early Friday, Saturday and Sunday mornings and you begin to see how drinking can affect an entire community.

If the effect of collegiate drinking on residential living was but periodic, it is likely that it would be better tolerated if not excused as many collegiate drinkers can recall at least one occasion when they also had too much to drink and were loud, obnoxious, or became sick. When such behavior becomes routine on particular nights and/or numerous students repeat this ritual on multiple nights, it becomes easy to understand why some student

affairs administrators estimate that upward of 25% of all collegiate attrition can be directly attributed to alcohol.

Another common bystander effect of collegiate drinking is the lack of respect and civility shown to those who the drinker encounters while intoxicated. Whether this is someone perceived as being annoying by the drinker or someone who is just in the “wrong place at the wrong time,” an intoxicated student can be verbally obnoxious if not outright abusive. Whether it is racial epithets or homo-phobic statements or graffiti that result from the drinker’s intoxication or simply the rude and insensitive comments that are made as the “first thing that comes to mind” is blurted out by the drinker, such behavior can impact the life of a bystander, perhaps with long standing consequences.

Alcohol-related behavior was addressed in an earlier chapter in this monograph. It is important to reiterate, however, that whether drunken comportment is attributed to impaired judgment, the anticipated “drunk role” to be enacted by an intoxicated student, or a phenomenon such as alcohol myopia²⁵, it is important to remember that incivility and verbal harassment can have a lasting effect on the quality of life at an institution. Those exposed to such behavior, especially on a regular basis, can quickly lose their tolerance for such conduct. Ironically, some of those collegiate drinkers who experience this and other bystander effects choose to change their own drinking behavior as these untoward consequences becomes mitigating factors in the maturing our phenomenon.

Yet another bystander effect of collegiate drinking is the impact such behavior can have on campus – community relations. As students choose to venture into the community surrounding the campus, either to partake of its resources or to escape the supervision of residence life on campus, when alcohol induced behavior brings these students to the attention of the community it is generally not in a positive fashion. Residents in neighborhoods where students attend parties can become annoyed by the noise generated by large numbers of student or the results of intoxicated behavior such as public urination, lewd conduct, or disrespectful behavior. Add to this the verbal or physical altercations, vandalism, or damage to property caused by students walking through gardens, pilfering items from neighboring yards, or disrespecting boundaries such as fences and it is easy to understand why campus – community relations can become seriously strained.

Conclusion

It would seem, if reading this chapter alone, that there is little doubt that collegiate drinking is a problem, and a problem of monumental proportion. With the NIAAA estimated 1,700 deaths and 97,000 sexual assaults plus the less notable untoward consequences experienced by the drinker or the bystander it is hard to deny that collegiate drinking is a problem of epidemic proportion. Anything that can be linked to 25% of all attrition in colleges and universities would likely make the front page of the *Chronicle of*

²⁵ See <http://dionysus.psych.wisc.edu/Lit/Articles/SteeleC1990a.pdf> to read a PDF copy of the 1990 *American Psychologist* article entitled, “Alcohol myopia: Its prized and dangerous effects” by Steele and Joseph (last accessed 19 July 2007)

Higher Education with a demand that something be done to stop the hemorrhaging of higher education's lifeblood, its tuition paying students.

But to return to a point raised in the preface of this monograph, does the drinking done by *some* students in higher education suggest that all collegiate drinking represents a problem to be eliminated? To use a medical model as a metaphor, what has been outlined in this chapter suggests a problem for which the "doctor" needs to prescribe a "treatment," the goal of which is a "cure" for the "disease." Now whether that course of action is as modest as a prescription for an antibiotic or as radical as major surgery designed to excise the disease, the point remains the same: A course of treatment prescribed by a specific expert in order to address a problem diagnosed by the expert prescribing the treatment. To return to the preface, what causes a problem is a problem because it causes problems. But I revisit my question regarding this adage: A problem for whom?

There can be no doubt that sexual assaults or racial epithets or vandalism is wrong and should never be tolerated. It is also clear that anything associated with such behavior, even tangentially, should be given serious study with an eye toward changing the objectionable behavior. But to suggest that collegiate drinking, in and of itself is the reason why these untoward incidents occur and that it must be eliminated, is perhaps naïve at best and hubris at the worst.

First, the likelihood of eliminating all underage and collegiate drinking is simply not practical. We have tried legislating morality on more occasions than can easily be counted. What we have learned is that to declare something wrong, that is to say, "bad," and to make that "bad thing" illegal does not necessarily reduce the likelihood that someone—or "some many"—will continue to engage in that behavior, perhaps out of defiance because they perceived the decision to prohibit it as inappropriate and draconian. In a perfect world, all one would need to do to eliminate a high-risk or dangerous behavior is point out the potential for risk or danger in that behavior and all would heed the warning...this is not a perfect world.

To view prevention as simply educating individuals about the risks associated with a behavior or practice that science has shown to be harmful is naïve at best and not likely to affect a change in human behavior. In part, because we all believe that bad things cannot happen to good people and we all know we are, personally, good people and bad things will therefore not happen *to us*, we refuse to believe that the warnings, however sound, apply to us. Just as we are reluctant to quit smoking cigarettes, restrict our direct contact with the sun, increase our daily exercise, reduce eating fats or emitting greenhouse gasses, so too are we loath to reduce our drinking simply because we are underage or because "some authority" suggested that drinking is high-risk.

Like a mathematician who attempts to solve a problem using a formula with a flawed premise, the solution eludes us. And instead of questioning the utility of the formula that has been used to solve the problem we question the research assistant who has collected the data, the administrator that makes demands of our time and distracts our thinking, or

the politician that demands instant results for our failure to solve the problem. But what if the problem is not the one we originally postulated?

This conundrum is reminiscent of the famous Indian fable about the six blind men and the elephant.

From John Godfrey Saxe's (1816-1887) version of the famous Indian legend²⁶,

It was six men of Indostan,
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approach'd the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, - "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

The Third approach'd the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," -quoth he- "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," -quoth he,-
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said- "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Then, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," -quoth he,- "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

MORAL,

So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean;
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

Considering Collegiate Drinking as a Cultural Phenomenon

For many considering the issue of collegiate drinking, the phenomenon appears to be straight forward: Students enter college, many choose to drink, and some of these students experience untoward consequences as the result. This, therefore, suggests that collegiate drinking is a problem. This universal view of student behavior seems, at first glance, to be both obvious and logical, but is it?

If we consider college students as a culturally distinct group, with its own attitudes, values, and beliefs reflective of the population attending traditional undergraduate, four-year institutions of higher education, then it is safe to consider this group as a minority in the dominant culture of contemporary 21st century America. This designation is proffered more because of the student's position of limited power and influence, particularly within the higher education system, even though they also represent a numerical minority in the culture as a whole.

Social scientists familiar with cultural diversity and issues related to what are referred to as inter-group differences, or those variations of attitude, values, and behaviors that distinguish the members of distinct cultural groups, have long recognized that to fully appreciate *the other*, the observer must access the meaning the members of this other group ascribe to particular actions. For this meaning to be accurately understood, it must be viewed in the context of those who are engaging in the action. Put another way, it is only from an insider's perspective that one is able to appreciate the meaning of the symbols used by members of the observed group to communicate among themselves and make meaning out of this experiences.

The first two monographs in this series addressed the social construction of reality in some detail with the second of these, *When they drink: Deconstructing collegiate alcohol us*²⁷, works specifically dedicated to addressing how variance in the meaning ascribed to two important icons of contemporary collegiate life, alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior, influence collegiate behavior. However, it is important to revisit this issue in this third monograph in order to facilitate a consideration of a larger question surrounding collegiate drinking, namely, is the perception of those who observe collegiate drinking behavior accurate in its interpretation of student imbibing? Is this student behavior indicative of a problem that has become endemic in higher education or do some students who choose to drink represent the problem? More to the point, does a problem exist at all or is the observed behavior that is of concern to collegiate administrators simply the action of students who have chosen to defy the will of the establishment?

One indication of prejudice in a culturally diverse population is the tendency for the dominant members in that population to view distinctions within the characteristics of the other groups as *deficient* at best and *deviant* at its worst. This is based primarily upon the

²⁷ <http://??>

perceived dissimilarity in the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the observed population as compared to those of the dominant culture—those in the majority get to determine what is acceptable, typical, or otherwise tolerable...*normal* is defined by the dominant culture. Although strides have been made to reduce the likelihood that this perceived difference will result in discrimination with associated acts of intolerance, a point in fact is that although this may be the trend as regards racial or ethnic difference, other cultural variance may nonetheless be viewed judgmentally. Underage and high-risk drinking by contemporary collegians is possibly one such example.

It is not the intention of this monograph to suggest that collegiate drinking is to be defended or that it poses no threat to the individual drinker or bystanders in the drinker's environment. Rather, the reader is invited to consider collegiate drinking from the perspective of the student making that decision to drink rather than that of an observer in the *dominant culture* evaluating it from that perspective. The negative consequences of underage and high-risk collegiate drinking are numerous and will be discussed in another chapter in this monograph. The reader is asked at this point, however, to consider if part of the difficulty in addressing this *collegiate drinking problem* may be related more to the fact that this phenomenon has been approached as a problem to be eradicated rather than a behavior trend to be understood in order to increase the likelihood of affecting its change.

Historically, legislative steps have been the primary vehicle to affect such change. From notable efforts to craft immigration laws designed to curtail the influx of culturally different individuals to current debates that have considered the passage of constitutional amendments making English the official language of America, looking to the legislative branch of government to address problems related to differences in the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the culturally different is not new. When members of the dominant culture feel threatened by the behaviors of a cultural minority, a frequent attempt to assuage the growing concerns of the dominant culture has been to control that behavior in question. This may be done with the best of intentions, namely to protect the minority from the consequences of their culturally different behavior, but the effect is nonetheless the same: To control the minority.

If members of the dominant culture perceive the behavior of those in the minority to be high-risk or dangerous, this behavior is often described using the language of the dominant culture. For example, if members of a minority culture pursue the treatment of physical or mental ailments via an approach that employs methods that differ from those prescribed by traditional Western medicine, the minority approach is deemed unscientific or folk medicine at best if not dangerous and subversive at the worst. Whether it is the perceived aberrant behavior of 17th century peasants that was viewed as indicative of witchcraft or possession by the Devil or the more contemporary consideration of inappropriate, unacceptable, or sufficiently odd behavior supposed to be mental imbalance, the result remains the same: Majority members of a culture observing the perceived deviant behavior of its minority members and labeling them problems that need to be eliminated.

But because members of the majority—even expert members of that majority with certification or professional training in their areas of specialty—deem a behavior problematic, does that necessarily mean that the behavior is problematic and needs to be eliminated? Perhaps this is true for members of the majority and herein rests the issue when considering collegiate drinking. Because college students break the law when they drink under age and/or they drink in ways deemed to be socially unacceptable and engage in behaviors while drinking that are perceived as inappropriate or intemperate, then collegiate drinking is *the problem* that must be eliminated. So it is that battle lines are drawn and strategies are planned to affect change.

In 1979, the author was presiding over a staff meeting as clinical director for a four-county alcohol and other drug program in rural Pennsylvania. At this meeting a discussion regarding how best to proceed with the treatment of a client whose behavior was deemed maladaptive by the clinical staff was taking place. The psychiatrist who was the medical consultant to the program shared the following story by way of offering his perspective on that discussion.

Dr. B told of a case he had treated several years earlier where a middle-aged woman had contacted him, concerned about her elderly mother's behavior as she lived in her home. It seemed that each morning the elderly woman would get up, fix herself some toast and tea and then sit in her favorite chair a good portion of the day watching her "friends" as they would practice their acrobatic routine on the telephone wires in front of the daughter's home. Because there were so "acrobats" swinging on the telephone wires in front of the daughter's home, the daughter knew her mother was hallucinating. Be this as it may, the mother delighted in the antics of her friends and whiled away the morning hours delighted to be in their company. Dr. B saw the mother, confirmed that indeed she was hallucinating, and prescribed the appropriate medication—it worked. The "friends" disappeared, however, their departure left the elderly woman dejected and she entered a depression so profound that she rarely left her room and began to neglect her personal needs.

Upon consulting Dr. B about this change in events, the daughter shared her concern about her mother's failing mental and physical health. Dr. B suggested to the daughter that although, to borrow an old adage, "the operation had been a success, the patient had, metaphorically speaking, died." It was decided to take the mother off the meds and allow her to enjoy her hallucinations, as the result of the "mental illness" was less destructive than the result of her "mental health."

The multicultural literature is rife with stories and examples of culturally different clients complaining of problems or symptoms that were deemed delusional by the Western trained practitioner. As the result of this diagnosis, treatment was provided that was ineffective at best and often exacerbated the client's/patient's condition. Because a client believed that a relative was possessed by a spirit or that the source of ones malady was a spell placed by a witch does not mean that the effects of this belief will be assuaged with traditional Western medicine.

What is the point? Again, the questions posed are not intended to advocate ignoring collegiate drinking or leaving students to pursue ethanol-induced revelry unfettered. It is suggested, however, that to “diagnose” and “treat” the problem of collegiate drinking may not necessarily result in the desired outcome. There is evidence, for example, that steps already taken to change the campus culture as regards drinking have had significant and positive results, but these results have not so much been to reduce the drinking as to move it to different locations. With the advent of environmental management strategies, many college and university campuses have been able to significantly reduce the incidents of drinking on-campus only to find students traveling off campus, often by car, to attend drinking parties hosted in the community by students living off-campus or who have secured clandestine venues off-campus in which to host parties.

There have been significant reductions in campus drinking violations in recent years. This has not been, however, without a corresponding increase in some high-risk student behaviors. Incidents of drinking and driving have increased and parties in clandestine locations that are less likely to be observed and interrupted by residence life staff or campus security have likewise increased. Less supervision of off-campus parties has resulted in more frequent incidents of excessive intoxication if not alcohol poisoning, and campus-community relation problems related to unruly student behavior associated with drinking have increased markedly as more students move off campus to escape the environmental management strategies of the institution. A problem/solution approach to addressing collegiate drinking is tantamount to trying to contain Jell-O in your bare hands: The tighter one tries to hold the Jell-O the more it tends to melt and ooze between the fingers trying to contain it.

So what is the solution?

Returning to the cross cultural metaphor introduced above, the effective multicultural counselor is a practitioner who recognizes his or her own propensity toward bias. This is not an overt, racist bias, but a bias steeped in the truism that we all “know what we learn and learn what we are taught.” The culturally sensitive practitioner is one who recognizes that client resistance to treatment or problems in establishing a clinical relationship with the client may as likely be due to problems related to the counselor’s unconscious bias or cultural ignorance as it is the client’s denial of the problem and unwillingness to address it. Put another way, a counselor’s client may have a problem, but the counselor’s approach to addressing that problem may alienate the client and decrease the likelihood of engaging the client in treatment. Unfortunately, when this happens, it is all too common that the counselor will blame the client for the lack of progress and dismisses that client from treatment as being uncooperative if not incorrigible²⁸.

It is likely that efforts by collegiate administrators and other individuals in a position of authority who deal with college students have embarked on a similar approach to addressing collegiate drinking. Viewing student drinking as errant behavior—that needs to be changed if not punished—with consequences that are only viewed as negative

²⁸ To learn more about this, the reader is invited to read the author’s essay on the topic at <http://www.robertchapman.net/essays/bias.htm>

places the concerned collegiate administrator and the social scientist on a collision course with the will of the contemporary college student.

As mentioned earlier, when college students perceive the efforts of authority figures to be arbitrary and capricious, they will react to this inequity by resisting change if not overtly defying their perceived dogmatic will. Gregory Bateson, a noted anthropologist and social scientist, spoke in his well known book, *Steps to an ecology of mind* (1972) of our fondness for living in an either/or world, a world where things are *either* “black” *or* they are “white.” As easy as it may be to approach reality in this way, it is an exclusive approach to engaging “the other.” If things are “either this or they are not,” it becomes very tempting to view that which differs from our perception of reality—that is to say, what is right, i.e., “the truth”—as being wrong.

I illustrate this point when teaching my students of counseling by asking the class, “Is two minutes a long time or a short time?” We all know the correct answer is that it depends. Most students, however, who rise to the bait of my question respond, “A short time,” to which I promptly ask the student to hold his or her breath for two minutes. Everyone chuckles as the point is made that the reality regarding my question is like so many things in life...relative. As silly as this example may be, it nonetheless points out how one’s view of reality can be stubborn at the least and when confronted by circumstances if not evidence to the contrary, result in one’s rejection of the other as not only different but wrong.

Returning to the metaphor of cultural difference when considering the views of those in power as they label student drinking “a problem,” students tend to be viewed as either deficient—that is, they are insufficiently aware of the risks—or deviant—meaning, errant, maladaptive, or simply put, bad—when it comes to making decisions about drinking. Dichotomous ways of looking at the world foster Bateson’s “either/or” world view. What Bateson proffered as an alternative to this view is what he termed a *both/and* world view. This view suggests that both sides of a dilemma have their mutual strengths and each should be considered, particular as regards the way they interact with each other. It is difficult to open a dialogue when one or both of the parties intended to participate views the other as incapable or unworthy of contributing.

A *both/and* perspective is not only more equitable in its view of the world, but also fosters a realization that the objective in considering two divergent perspectives such as those of collegiate administrators and contemporary college students is recognizing that each group is positioned to influence the perspective of the other. The focus shifts from confrontation to collaboration. This can only occur when both parties understand the issue at hand from the perspective of the other. Wayne Dyer, a noted pop-psychologist of the 1980’s, once stated, “The only difference between a flower and a weed is a judgment.” Whether students and administrators see each other’s views regarding collegiate drinking as “flowers” to be cultivated or “weeds” to be eliminated is a function of appreciating each other’s perspective on the issue. Put another way, it is not collegiate drinking that is the issue of contention but each side’s view of the other’s interpretation of its significance.

In a constructivist view of the world, personal narratives play an important role in determining how individuals will view themselves both individually and in concert with the rest of the world. As each individual develops a personal story, a narrative if you will, he or she will construct a personal reality that incorporates the various signs and symbols of primacy to that individual. The meaning ascribed to these signs and symbols, examples including tangibles such as alcohol and drinking as well as constructs such as language, results from one's interaction with others. It is how "things" and words are used that result in the meaning they represent. As outlined in the previous monograph, it is through this social intercourse that the individual comes to understand the meaning each symbol holds in his or her personal story, that is, his or her role in his or her culture.

To employ a simple example to illustrate this point consider the language in which this monograph has been written. The reader has followed the path laid out to this point, albeit with some skepticism or a differing point of view, because he or she reads and understands English. Chances are that many if not most readers understand English because this is the language that was spoken to them at that time developmentally when they became able to discern the meaning associated with particular auditory symbols that were presented to them. If this work had been written in Moscow for a Russian audience, the language of conveyance and the reader's ability to understand it would have been the result of exactly the same process even though English and Russian are fundamentally different, down to the alphabets used to communicate in written form. Put simply, you know what you learn and you learn what you are taught. This does not preclude learning something new and quite different, but it does necessitate that to learn that something new there must be a conscious decision, however reluctantly made, to pursue that new line of thinking.

As Sandra Anice Barnes once wrote, "It is so hard to (change) when I have to, and so easy when I want to." Counselors have become appreciative of this truism as they have shifted from trying to make their clients cease engaging in maladaptive behaviors and shifted their focus instead to motivating clients to opt for pursuing more adaptive behaviors. As the old adage goes, "You can lead a horse to water but not make it drink." True as this may be, we can nonetheless salt the oats. Instead of trying to mandate the desired change and being met with resistance if not open defiance, the modern counselor has learned to focus instead on motivating the client to choose a different, more adaptive course of action.

It is only when the lines of communication have been opened between individuals holding disparate views on a topic that a mutually respectful dialogue can occur. It is out of this intercourse that change occurs, almost always involving change to both parties. A key building block for this mutually respectful dialogue is the *both/and* collaborative position posited by Bateson. Unfortunately, the historic platform from which a dialogue between collegiate drinkers and those attempting to change their behavior has been an *either/or*, confrontational interaction that has tended to generate more heat than light.

Conclusion

College students, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or gender represent a separate and distinct culture, replete with its own attitudes, values, and behaviors. As such, it exists as a subculture or minority in the dominant mainstream of white, male, middleclass America. As a minority, these students have a limited voice and are essentially devoid of power to impact public policy as regards its impact on them. Consequently, when encountering efforts of the dominant culture to control their behavior, specifically as regards alcohol and other drug use, this minority has reacted to what it perceived to be subjective and impulsive efforts by administrators and legislators to curtail their freedoms and rights.

The resulting perception of disregard if not disrespect for the laws, policies, and regulations enacted by administrators and legislators concerned with curtailing high-risk and dangerous drinking has placed the dominant culture squarely at odds with its college student minority. With each camp in this conflict viewing the other's position as unwarranted, inappropriate, and/or "wrong," the issue of collegiate drinking has become much like that of peace in the Middle East, a concept fraught by disparate ideologies that preclude a dialogue that respects the legitimate concerns and issues of parties on both sides.

What are the concerns of the administrators and parents and members of the community that motivate their efforts to control collegiate drinking? Why do students find the efforts to curtail high-risk drinking so restrictive and inappropriate? Just what are the consequences of collegiate drinking...those that endear the past time to those students that drink and affect the quality of life for those in their environment? These are some of the questions at the heart of this debate.

Suggestions to the Field...and Parents

As of the writing of this monograph during the summer of 2007, the City of Philadelphia is concerned that it may set a new record for the number of murders recorded in a calendar year. Although murder in general—and those committed by guns specifically—is not unique to Philadelphia, it is nonetheless an issue of great concern to those in an area where they occur. So what does the murder rate in Philadelphia have to do with the untoward consequences of collegiate drinking? On the surface nothing, but consider this: Philadelphia City Council has been trying to pass gun control legislation in the City for a number of years only to be told that gun control is an issue for the Pennsylvania State Legislature's consideration in Harrisburg. Here in lies the rub: It seems that Harrisburg is reluctant to pass gun control legislation because to do so is perceived as curtailing the rights of Pennsylvanians to acquire and use firearms and this would present a serious concern for many Pennsylvanians who use firearms for recreational purposes, for example, hunting and other sports activities that involve firearms.

Before you dismiss the issue of murder and gun control as a *liberal vs. conservative* political difference of opinion, consider that firearms in general and handguns specifically are particular items that have symbolic meaning and this meaning differs, significantly as it turns out, between those living in either of Pennsylvania's two urban centers—Philadelphia in Southeastern Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh in the Southwest—and *everyone else* in Pennsylvania. In the urban centers, especially Philadelphia, a handgun is perceived as a weapon that is used offensively—or as is argued by those arrested for their use as a weapon, defensively. That is to say that *symbolically*, the meaning ascribed to a firearm by those who use them and by those who see or hear about their use, offensively or defensively, is that they are used to *shoot people*. In Upstate Pennsylvania, the symbolic meaning ascribed to a firearm, be it a rifle or a handgun, is that it is a sporting implement used not to shoot people, but to shoot targets, varmints, or game in the fields and woods of rural PA.

The meaning ascribed to an item, be it a firearm or an alcoholic drink results from the way the item is used and, consequently, perceived by those who use it and/or observe its use. It is the interaction among individuals *regarding the use of the item* that allows the meaning for the item, gesture, word or phrase, to be determined. Until and unless that meaning changes, it will remain constant for the individual or group. If my point seems labored or lost in what appears to the reader to be the author's attempt to suggest a political position, let me create an example to illustrate my point using a common, everyday item that would appear to suggest no debate as regards its *ascribed meaning*: A screwdriver...to be specific, a *Philips head* screwdriver.

It is likely that every reader will recognize a Philips head screwdriver just by its name. For those perhaps unfamiliar with this common household tool, it is a particular type of screwdriver used to drive the common threaded fasteners with the crossed-grooved head looking something like an addition sign...+ Whether it is a younger or older person viewing the item, a racially mixed group, someone from rural Pennsylvania or urban PA,

or someone who speaks English or another language, chances are good that all will agree on what the item is and its use.

What happens, however, when the prosecutor in a murder trial introduced this screwdriver to the jury, indicating that it was the implement by which a homicide was committed? Not only has the prosecutor ascribed a new meaning...or at least an additional meaning...to the screwdriver, but the jury, judge, and others in the courtroom have likely come to see the screw drivers as a *different sort of tool* than they had originally considered it to be. It is not only how the item was used, but also how the item is *described* and how its use is *portrayed* that results in a symbolic shift in how that item is viewed, that is to say, *understood*. This is the point the reader is invited to consider.

To return to a question posed in the Preface to this monograph, “is collegiate drinking a problem?” When first reading this question in the preface you may have wondered about the author’s intent in asking it: Can he be serious? Is there any doubt? Yet if we look at this behavior—and more importantly the symbolic meaning of the behavior and of the substance consumed for that matter—the question takes on a different meaning. Is it how collegiate drinking is interpreted by those who observe it and alcohol’s use or is it those who consume it who determines if it is a problem? Put another way; is it the drinking or the untoward consequences *for some drinkers* that accompany the drinking that constitutes the issue of concern? If it is the former, then perhaps we need to continue doing what we have been doing of late to prevent or intervene with troublesome collegiate drinking. If, however, the reader shares the author’s question as to *what’s what* with collegiate drinking, perhaps there are some additional steps that can be taken to further our quest to reduce the occurrence of troublesome collegiate drinking and the untoward consequences that all too often accompany it.

Suggestions

First—and for all who may be reading this monograph be that administrator, parent, student, or prevention specialist--

For Administrators, Legislators, and Those in Positions of Authority

Afterwards: What does all this Mean?

So, is collegiate drinking a problem or what?

Clearly, any time that any one consumes alcohol so as to reach a point where judgment is seriously impaired, health is placed at risk, or the wellbeing of others is jeopardized, that consumption is problematic. Although alcohol in and of itself is neither a good thing nor a bad thing, the way one chooses to consume it can herald the advent of a problem. But because “I” may drink in such a way as to create a problem for others or myself, does this necessarily mean that drinking is a problem? And if I am a college student who choose to drink in a dangerous or problem creating way, does this mean that all collegiate drinking, in and of itself is a problem? I suggest this is not the case.

It is true that if I am under the legal age to purchase and use alcohol, by definition I abuse it when I consume it. This is, however, not a priori proof that collegiate drinking by itself is a problem, even if two-thirds to three-quarters of the college drinkers are underage. As has been suggested in this manuscript, what causes a problem is a problem *if it causes problems.*

Confusion surrounds the question of collegiate drinking, in part, because of the definition of a *binge* has been tied to a specific number of drinks consumed during a single outing. To define a binge as four or more standard drinks for a woman or five or more for a male in an outing fails to take into consideration two crucial variables in determining if one drinking will increase. More specifically, the likelihood of presenting harm to oneself or others when drinking is not only a factor of the number of drinks consumed, but also the weight of the drinker and the period of time during which the alcohol was consumed. Add to these constants the variables of other substances in the drinker’s system, perhaps over-the-counter medications or prescription drugs, and the amount and type of food in the drinker’s stomach to name two and we quickly reach a point where it is difficult to determine if a consumer’s use constitutes a “binge” based on the number of drinks consumed alone²⁹.

Because college students are reported to “binge drink” with some degree of frequency³⁰, it is easy to see how the typical consumer of media reports on collegiate drinking will assume that “all” college students are “going to Hell in a booze soaked hand basket.” This manuscript has not been written to suggest that these rates of collegiate drinking are

²⁹ Note: Just as a 240 lb male may be able to drink 5 standard drinks on a full stomach over several hours and have a relatively low blood alcohol level, it is equally possible to a 105 lb. woman taking an over-the-counter cold remedy may have a dangerously high blood alcohol level and have consumed 3 drinks in one hour. To read more about the problems associated with the “4+/5+” drink definition of a binge, see Appendix ?

³⁰ The College Alcohol Survey conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health suggests that 22% of college students binge regularly (at least twice in the previous 2 weeks) and 44% at least once in the previous 2 weeks.

innocent or without risk. Neither is it the intent of this author to suggest that these data are not reasons for senior administrator or parental concern. But because something is of concern does not mean that it is a pandemic. Just as concerns regarding alcohol are not the “spirits in a bottle but the spirits in the individual,” so is the issue collegiate drinking not that college students consume alcohol, but rather the way certain of those students choose to consume it. Collegiate drinking is therefore not so much a problem to be eliminated, as it is a dilemma to be resolved.

If collegiate drinking is not the problem so much as the way certain collegians choose to drink, what should we do?

Well, that is an excellent question. Unfortunately, the general public’s focus, including legislators, parents, and the news media, has been trained on collegiate drinking—all collegiate drinking—as just that, “the problem.” Just as the U.S. has chosen to look at its drug problem as being the drugs themselves and declared a “war” on them, so has the approach to addressing the collegiate drinking problem tended to focus on alcohol and student access to it.

As controversial as it may be to point out, there will always be those who choose to drink, in college and out, just as there will always be those who choose to consume drugs. It simply is not pragmatic to make one’s primary objective in addressing concerns about alcohol and other drug use the elimination of all collegiate drinking—or all underage drinking for that matter—or the use of any illicit substances by members of this society. It is realistic, however, to expect to impact the use of these substances by members of this society in such a way as to impact the choices those individuals make with regards to when and how to consume these psychoactive substances.

Important steps have been taken in the last 15 years to significantly impact the use of alcohol by college students. Environmental management has changed the way students use alcohol on campus. Campus – community coalitions have enabled individuals to band together in order to *act on* the concern about collegiate drinking instead of *react to* it. Evidence-based research findings demonstrating how to effectively change student behavior have been used to develop brief interventions that can be employed to motivate self-imposed reductions in frequency and quantity of alcohol used. Principles of social psychology have been harnessed to develop prevention strategies designed to affect individual student choices about alcohol and its consumption by correcting misperceptions of the social norms on a campus regarding how often peers drink and in what frequency and quantity.

These changes in how alcohol is used by college students have not yet eliminated the propensity of college students to drink, but they do show promise in affecting the individual decisions that most students make as regards alcohol and its consumption. This, however, is not all that can or should be done in an attempt to resolve the dilemma of dangerous and high-risk drinking.

We know that students change their understanding of alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior over the course of their collegiate experience. This “maturing out” as it is referred to in the literature happens naturally and without any coaxing by administrators, parents, or legislators. The challenge is how to hasten this process so that it takes months rather than years to occur. This *maturing out*, as suggested in the second monograph in this series, results when students have the opportunity to reconsider the cost/benefit ratio that frequently results when the true consequences of personal decisions about alcohol and drinking are compared with the student’s anticipated intent. This tendency to engage in “decisional balancing” as counselors refer to this process provides the student with the opportunity to step back, look at the big picture that is their entire life on campus, and draw conclusions from the feedback they receive as whether the price they pay to drink is worth the benefit they gain from doing so. By better understanding the process by which this occurs, prevention specialists, senior administrators, parents, and others concerned with resolving the dilemma surrounding collegiate drinking can hasten the process of maturing out. As Sandra Anise Barnes once wrote, “It is so hard to (change) when I have to; and so easy when I want to.” This, then, is the issue of primacy on which prevention specialists and administrators in higher education alike should focus. Instead of being preoccupied with “fixing the problem”—the problem being that students drink—the focus shifts to hastening the process students already engage in.

Students alter their behavior when they recognize that change is actually less of a hassle than to continue a pattern of behavior they have historically been following. Those reading this manuscript are likely able to recall a time when they too engaged in high-risk if not dangerous behaviors only to come to a point where the cost/benefit ratio shifted and those behaviors changed as different wants and objectives came into focus. The challenge for those of us concerned about the high-risk and dangerous behavior of some college students today is to better understand the process by which they ascribe meaning to the alcoholic icons of contemporary collegiate life...”partying,” “drinking games,” and “pre-gaming” to mention but a few. As we are better able to glean a more complete understanding of this process we will be able to incorporate what is learned into the programs we design and the strategies we develop by which to influence students. As a mentor of mine once quipped, “While you can lead a horse to water, you cannot make it drink. But you can salt the oats.”

“What we should do,” to address the question asked, is broaden our purview to include attention to this process by which students establish priorities and affix meaning to the cultural symbols in their lives. It is not that we should abandon our interests in a pursuit of environmental management and brief interventions with an indicated population of high-risk students, but rather expand our focus to include a greater awareness of the culture in which contemporary college students live. The more we know about how meaning is ascribed to the symbols of contemporary collegiate life by the students living that life, the better prepared we will be to affect that life and reduce the likelihood of harm.

Are we just supposed to let students do what they want and hope for the best? It's a much more dangerous world today than when we were drinking in college 30 years ago.

Abdicating responsibility to do something about our concerns is not a reasonable option. I remember a sign on the overhead light in my dentist's office years ago. It read something like, "Ignoring concern in hopes that it will go away is not a solution." I suspect this is sound advice for those of us concerned about collegiate drinking. However, when addressing our concerns, we need to recognize that we view collegiate behavior through our own set of lenses meaning our own set of biases.

Our concerns are real and steeped in facts although the interpretation of these facts may result in different conclusions for the student drinker and academic administrator. Because some students have yet to take that step back to where the big picture can be seen, this does not mean that we are unaware of the risks that they run or that we should not do something to intervene. But there is a difference between reacting to what we see contemporary students doing and acting in accordance with it.

Our historic efforts to legislate morality have never worked well as a means of keeping people from engaging in risk. As regards alcohol, it did not happen in 1920 when the 19th amendment ushering in prohibition was ratified; it did not happen in 1984 when then President Reagan tied the receipt of federal highway funds to individual states passing a 21-year-old minimum drinking age; and eliminating underage drinking has not happened by passing tough "three-strikes-and-your-out" alcohol policies on campus. True, each of these efforts has influenced individual behavior, but none of them have eliminated what was/is viewed as being the problem, namely, errant student behavior.

If there is a "collegiate drinking problem" it is not so much the consumption of alcohol by students as it is the fact that administrators, parents, legislators—and even some students themselves—view student drinking as being *the* problem. As the protagonist in Walt Kelly's famous cartoon strip *Pogo* so aptly stated many years ago: "We have seen the enemy, and he is us." As long as we view students as *being the* problem, we will continue to treat them as *the* problem. Unfortunately, this does not so much bring about change in individual student behavior as it conditions wariness and a tendency to move underground in order to sidestep the consequences that may be associated with unsanctioned behavior.

Does the fact that we speak the same language ensure that we hear the same thing?

One of the points raised in this monograph has been the cultural uniqueness of the contemporary collegiate community. As sensitive as many in the human service field have become to issues of cultural diversity and the importance of pluralism in the 21st century, it is important to realize that the contemporary college student is a part of a vast American subculture.

Today's college students operate in a world with its own set of attitudes, values, and beliefs. These constitute the filters through which the messages we deliver will be received. If we like to speak face-to-face over coffee in the morning and students prefer to text message "24/7," each one's preference ensures the other's frustration and likely will impact the burgeoning relationship. A good example of such differences can be seen in the relatively recent practice of conducting student activities at a time of the day more likely to coincide with student preferences to socialize. Historically, "student life" offices on campus would schedule entertainment for student between 8 PM and midnight. In an environment where most students do not "come out to play" until 10 PM, such events would fail to attract large student crowds and those who do attend are just as likely to go from the "alcohol-free" event to a keg party hosted by peers that is just getting started as the campus sponsored event ends.

Understanding the campus culture of the "Millennial Generation" is of the utmost importance if we hope to communicate with and inform the understanding of contemporary collegians. Just as professors teaching today's student have had to learn to employ pedagogy infused with graphics, the Internet, and other digital enhanced syllabi in order to engage them intellectually, so much the administrator and student affairs professional attend to these same issues if hoping to affect student understanding regarding the risks associated with alcohol and other drug use.

Because prevention strategies I produce make sense to me, this does not ensure that students will understand let alone embrace their messages. Of all the approaches developed to prevent untoward consequences related to alcohol and other drug use, the "awareness campaign" as a stand alone program of prevention is the quintessential example of an ineffective effort. It is not that these campaigns fail to educate students about the risks associated with certain behaviors; it is that students do not believe that they are likely to experience the untoward consequences that are facilitated by engaging in them and therefore see no reason to change their individual behaviors.

By way of explaining this point, consider a classic theory taken from social psychology, the *Just World Hypothesis*³¹. Essentially this theory suggests that individuals get what they deserve. With this understanding of how the world operates, the contemporary collegian essential believes that *good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad*. They know from the awareness campaigns that *bad things* can happen when someone drinks or drugs to excess, but because they all know that *they are good people*, the assumption is that "bad things will not happen to me." This phenomenon is what many students jokingly refer to as being "bullet proof" when considering the risks associated with collegiate drinking.

³¹ For a more in depth consideration of this topic and its implications I the prevention of high-risk and dangerous drinking, consult the prologue to the first monograph in this series, "[*When they drink: A practitioner's look at best practices in preventing high-risk & dangerous collegiate drinking*](#) (click on title to access this work online).

So, briefly, what is recommended for the future?

I am frequently struck by what I perceive to be a consistent if not stubborn problem as I speak to and correspond with student affairs colleagues about the persistent problem of high-risk or dangerous collegiate drinking. As I express my views and argue my positions on prevention, intervention and treatment of substance using students, I frequently get respectful but nonetheless concerned questions about approaches steeped in “environmental management,” “harm reduction,” “Motivational Interviewing” and “stages of change” theory as though they exist somewhere beyond the known solar system of acceptable students affairs strategies. Comments—if not respectful objections—from colleagues lament “having to choose” between various models as if believing that I am somehow committing heresy by advocating the abandonment of traditional views regarding collegiate drinking in reckless pursuit of my own professorial perspectives on delivering effective and comprehensive student alcohol and other drug (AOD) services.

When introducing the topic of “new” or “different” approaches in the delivery of AOD services to students, there appears to be something of a generalized sense of concern that “The Way,” as it is understood, is about to be “trashed.” This misperception seems to set off a series of events culminating in emotional reactions that cause the discussion to generate more heat than light. Put another way, it would seem that student affairs professionals have traditionally approached the issue of new prevention and intervention strategies as somehow necessitating a dichotomous choice between the proposed new models of programming and the established, traditional way. It is as if there is a *one-size-fits-all*, “K-Mart approach” to delivering effective AOD services to students. I sometimes wonder if student affairs professionals truly believe there is one correct way, “THE way” if you will, to address substance use problems in higher education with all else being either “wrong” or at best, “ineffective.”

While I do not argue that there are “best practices”—I too have my own opinion on what works best and is effective in addressing high-risk and dangerous student behavior—the purpose of this conclusion to the monograph is not to further any one “model.” Rather, I ask, what if the student affairs was to embrace the fact that there may be more than “one truth”? Does everyone with coronary artery disease have by-pass surgery? Are all individuals diagnosed with depression treated with medication? Is surgery the only approach to treating cancer with all other approaches somehow “wrong” or at best ineffective?

It would seem to me that our field is in need of addressing some rather provocative questions: What is the purpose of addressing student drinking and substance use behaviors? Is it to simply address the problem or do we intend to influence the choices and behaviors of the individual students affected by the problem? Students mandated to prevention and intervention efforts by the campus judicial system are likely to respond to programming differently than are those who present voluntarily. Yet if health educators, counselors, and other student affairs professionals somehow feel obliged to decide “which prevention or intervention approach is right and which is wrong,” then we are

basically forcing them to address the campus problem rather than the individual student experiencing the problem—"attention shoppers: Blue-light special on changing high-risk student behavior in aisle 4; one-size-fits-all."

As my grandfather used to tell me, "Robert, sometimes you have to give folks what they want to get the chance to give them what they need." Sometimes we need to help clients address the items on their agendas in order to encourage them to trust us enough to consider the items on ours. As James Prochaska and others argue in defense of their view that individuals progress toward behavior change along a continuum, change happens in stages. If this is true, we, as student affairs professionals, have an obligation to meet our students where they are on this continuum of readiness to change. Rather than insist that students meet us where we are in a "one-size-fits-all" approach to addressing high-risk behaviors, perhaps we need to consider that student resistance may say more about the effectiveness and appropriateness of our efforts than it does about the students who are resisting.

A case in point: As environmental strategies employed by campuses intent on changing the campus drinking culture begin to yield results, a phenomenon is beginning to emerge across the country. As comprehensive policies are implemented, enforcement is consistently pursued, and the availability of alcohol is curtailed on campus, students are choosing to party away from this controlled environment, often in high-risk environments such as run down apartments or unsafe/un-regulated (by licensing authorities) locations. As it becomes more difficult to party on campus due to efforts to curb high-risk, dangerous student drinking, some students--and admittedly this is a minority--have opted to take their former approach to collegiate socializing away from the areas regulated or directly influenced by campus rules and regulations. As a disciple of harm reduction, I am troubled by this phenomenon as it suggests that the evidence of our success on campus may result in placing students at greater risk as they change the venue of their socializing rather than their behavior.

I do not for a moment doubt the utility of environmental strategies, nor do I advocate curbing this effective approach to "changing the campus drinking culture," but at the same time, we need to ask, "do we have an obligation to address the resulting social changes that are occurring in that campus drinking culture?" And if so, how might we go about doing so?

It seems to me that the focus on the environmental model of change has been pursued to the exclusion of the ecological model. While this may at first seem like the opening salvo in a lesson on semantics, these are two distinctly different approaches to changing collegiate drinking. Yet like mentioned above, the quest for the "silver bullet" that will slay the werewolf of high-risk collegiate drinking too often drives us to pursue "the" way to address the problem rather than realize it will likely be a coalition of approaches that eventually resolves the dilemma.

Where the environmental model targets those factors that are constants on campuses and can affect student behavior, e.g., public policy, enforcement, alcohol-free alternatives,

etc., the ecological model focuses on the dynamic population that attends these campuses. Environmental strategies are focused on the constants that remain fixed from year to year whereas the student population is fluid, changing from class-year to class-year. To invest in changing the environment to which students come to pursue a higher education without considering similar strategies designed to address the needs of the students making the migration is something akin to establishing safe compounds in a foreign country for our visitors without addressing their need to become aware of local customs, language, or values.

In the ecological model, “(a) young people come to campus with social, family, and drinking histories that influence their college drinking behaviors; and (b) once on campus, peers, residence, and lifestyle factors further influence what they believe, endorse, and do with regard to alcohol” – from

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/amod/behavemod.html>.

It is important that we recognize that, “...drinking-related norms and behaviors result from interactions over time and space between many individual and environmental factors located at each level of the social continuum (individual, peer, school, community, and culture). Because environmental factors remain constant in the college environment, where the student population changes annually, the simultaneous implementation of both high risk programs that target individual determinants of drinking and population programs that target environmental determinants of drinking have greater potential to produce lasting changes” - from

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/amod/modelhow.html>.

Students see the world through their own set of lenses. They march, if you will pardon the cliché, to the beat of a different drummer. Their understanding of the icons of collegiate life that alcohol and drinking have become is influenced by their interactions with these icons as well as their peers who also have also encountered them. I suspect that parents, legislators, and we student affairs professionals perceive collegiate drinking as a problem whereas students perceive it as simply a function of collegiate socializing.

Until and unless we can grasp the meaning students ascribe to alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior we will be unable to understand the enigma that has come to be known as the “underage drinking problem.” The irony is that students, of their own accord, change their attitudes, values, and beliefs about alcohol naturally and without intentional interventions by administrators, parents, or mandated policies or legislation. The *maturing out phenomenon* is and always has been a factor affecting the behavior of “young people” as the move from adolescence through early adulthood into mature adult status, becoming the next generation of adults concerned about the errant behavior of college students.

The challenge that faces us is to continue to use the tools we have forged to address our concerns related to collegiate drinking, but to step back and recognize that there is more to it than simply focusing on the behavior itself. We need to understand the process by which students come to view alcohol and drinking in such different ways than do we

adults. More to the point, we need to understand the process by which students call their own attitudes, values, and beliefs about alcohol and drinking into question and moderate them of their own accord. When we have accomplished this we will be better able to address the issues of prevention in such a way as to hasten the naturally occurring process of maturing out and thereby reduce the frequency of untoward drinking-related consequences in the process.

There is an old African proverb that suggests, “The way you eat an elephant is one bite at a time.” Perhaps we should recognize that change happens “one student at a time,” and the approaches we employ should be tailored to the needs of those individual students rather than the problems we see so many experiencing. Why must we as student affairs professionals be forced to choose between models of prevention and intervention rather than to approach them as all being “tools in the same student affairs toolbox,” available for use as the job requires. Something else my grandfather taught me all those years ago was that, “True craftsmen don’t open paint cans with a screw driver.” Perhaps we should choose the best tool for the job to ensure the best results when we have finished.